



## Article

# Livelihood Strategies during the COVID-19 Epidemic in Materially Disadvantaged Roma Communities from Covasna County, Romania

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**Abstract:** The study aims to analyze the livelihood strategies related to the labour market during the coronavirus pandemic in the context of the material and income situation in Roma communities in a multicultural rural area of Covasna County, Romania. The data source comprises adapted sociological research that was carried out using multiple methods in 2021, in three localities: Boroşneu, Ojdula, and Zăbala in Covasna County, Romania. Of the dimensions examined, housing deprivation, material deprivation, and unemployment were of particular importance. Based on these dimensions, we analyzed the local economic situation and social services; we then developed a typology of dimensions to analyze the livelihood strategies of Roma groups from different socio-economic backgrounds during the coronavirus pandemic. We tried to answer questions about the changes and ways of adaptation in the livelihood strategies of Roma communities to the restrictions that occurred during the coronavirus pandemic in Romania from 2020–2021. The results of the research show that during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the material and income situations worsened for people previously employed in the informal labour market, involved in precarious work, and those of very low work intensity in selected rural Roma communities in Covasna County. Neither the regulations and legal measures introduced, nor the social protection system, was sensitive to the needs of the Roma, who were the most vulnerable to the social consequences of the pandemic restrictions.

**Keywords:** Roma; life strategies; deprivation; COVID-19; Romania



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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great disruption to the way of life, and access to health services, for much of the world, including the European Union. EU member states, with few exceptions, imposed strict measures, restricting the movement of people and enforcing social–physical distancing. According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, although restrictive measures were aimed at protecting the health of the population and applied to all citizens, they had a differentiated effect depending on the social situation. Thus, the restrictive lockdown measures, especially the one on work and mobility, have had much more serious negative effects, and with multiple consequences, on the daily life of marginalized and socially excluded Roma and Travelers (EUAFR 2020, p. 5).

With regard to employment, the EUAFR report shows that lockdowns have, in many cases, left Roma unemployed or in precarious employment (see Standing 2007), with the informal status of such work making it difficult for people to claim unemployment support and benefits or be available for formal work cessation situations. A broad category particularly affected is those working as street vendors or hawkers. Requirements for formal residence registration, which some Roma and Travelers do not have proper documentation for, limit their access to social assistance services (other than unemployment) and make their situation worse. In terms of education, without adequate internet access, many Roma and Traveler children cannot benefit from online distance-learning measures, but this will not be analyzed in this study. Regarding housing, the report shows that the persistent lack

of basic infrastructure, especially in informal settlements and camps, increases the risk of infection with COVID-19 (EUAFR 2020, p. 5). In the case of Romania, it is not so much the lack of permanent housing that is the problem as the lack of adequate hygiene and bathroom conditions, as well as the overcrowded living conditions. Many people sleep in a small room, which does not allow a sick person to isolate in another room from the rest of the family.

The phenomenon of increased exposure to risks is widespread among Roma. Based on several projects and surveys, the marginalized and/or segregated population that can partially or totally relate to Roma communities exceeds 1-million people in total (see SocioRoMap, Horváth 2017).

The present study aims to analyze livelihood strategies related to the labour market during the coronavirus pandemic in the context of the material and income situation in Roma communities in a multicultural rural area of Romania: Covasna County. Two of the dimensions examined were of particular importance: employment status and material and housing deprivation (which cannot be separated). These were used to analyze the employment situation of the local economy and social services, and to draw a socio-economic profile of the municipalities in relation to the Roma during the Coronavirus pandemic.

However, the material, housing, and labour market integration situation of Roma living in total or partial segregation in CEE countries was known in many respects (as we will see in Section 2) even before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, through our research, we tried to clarify through the formulated research questions, patterns, and ways of adaptation in the livelihood strategies of rural Roma communities under pandemic restrictions. We focused both on the analysis of the responsiveness of vulnerable Roma communities and of the national or local social protection system to crisis situations that may suddenly arise in these vulnerable communities.

## 2. Theoretical Context: The Situation of the Roma in Romania

A variety of methods have been developed and applied in Romania and in the countries of the region over the past decades to study the living conditions and livelihood strategies of disadvantaged Roma communities. We will briefly review these in order to situate and contextualize our own research design.

One approach is the multidimensional quantitative analysis based on macro-statistical data, which has a decades-long history of mapping cumulative deprivation in Europe, including the Central and Eastern European region. Much of the analysis on Roma deprivation and the problem of social exclusion and intergenerational deprivation also focuses on the spatial occurrence of these phenomena as a way to capture the phenomenon of segregation (Zamfir and Zamfir 1993; Ladányi and Szelényi 2003, 2006; Sandu 1999, 2005, 2011; Ladányi and Virág 2009; Ladányi et al. 2010; Vincze 2013; Vincze and Hossu 2014; Horváth 2017; Zamfir 2018).

In Romania, the first, most prominent representative of multidimensional quantitative situation analysis was Dumitru Sandu, whose first analysis in this direction was not explicitly on the spatial correlation between Roma and disadvantages, but he outlined and empirically addressed the issue of inequalities and cultural differences, including cultural spaces, in the Romanian territory (Sandu 1999). Subsequently, the Social Development Index (LHDI), developed at the request of the World Bank and developed by Sandu (2011), includes four main dimensions: human capital (the primary education level of the local population), health capital (life expectancy at birth), vitality capital (average age of the population aged 14 and above) and material capital. The latter includes three housing-related indicators (average useful floor area of dwellings, local energy/gas access, and number of private cars per thousand inhabitants). For structural reasons, the index does not generally measure deprivation at the local level. Furthermore, because it measures urban and rural situations in the same way, it is less sensitive to differences between villages.

In another analysis of the relationship between deprivation and segregation and Roma attachment based on census data, Czirfusz et al. (2013), in the framework of the European

Commission-funded international collaborative research *The Territorial Dimension of Social Exclusion in Europe*, point out that in measuring multidimensional deprivation, it is important to take into account the ethnic composition of the study area. In the framework of this research, regional (NUTS-2 and NUTS-3) poverty and social exclusion maps were produced in seven Central and Eastern European countries (including Romania), which were compiled by combining national census data with Labour Force Surveys and EU-SILC data provided by Eurostat (Simler 2016).

In Romania, a relatively recent study on poverty and exclusion was carried out by a team of World Bank experts (Teşliuc et al. 2016). The analysis is based on a spatial aggregation of the 2011 Romanian census data, which were disaggregated into small (50–500 inhabitants) census districts within the municipality. In the report, known as the “Atlas,” it was pointed out that the municipalities identified as marginalized are favoured in several calls for proposals opened by the European Union to increase social inclusion and reduce poverty, such as the Human Resources or Infrastructure Grants. Thus, they also benefited from the practical use of the Atlas of Urban Marginalized Zones prepared by World Bank experts (Swinkles et al. 2016).

The marginalized rural zone was excluded by Teşliuc et al. (2016) as “a compact zone (census sector) within the village (intravilan) in which people with low human capital live, with few declared jobs and inadequate housing conditions compared to other residents living in rural areas” (Teşliuc et al. 2016, pp. 20–21). For each dimension, a zone was considered deprived if its indicator value was in the bottom 20% of the national rural value, except for housing, where the lower bound was set at the most deprived 10%. This indicator system differs from international indicators but is locally relevant. The analysis shows that if a neighbourhood is deprived along all three dimensions, it is considered marginalized. Thus, in Romania, 2244 rural census sectors (neighborhoods) with a combined population of 564,000 were declared marginalized (Teşliuc et al. 2016, pp. 21–22).

Another World Bank working group (Simler 2014), based on the analysis of the National Commission for the Alleviation of Poverty (CASPI), analyzed the 2011 census data and identified 992 municipalities as marginalized communities. Within these, 410 of the poorest municipalities in Romania were identified.

When comparing the marginalized districts identified in the World Bank indicators with the population that identified themselves as Roma in the 2011 census, it can be observed that 59 percent of the marginalized in the 992 municipalities did not identify themselves as Roma at the 2011 census, and 18 percent of the district/sector population identified themselves as Roma in less than 20 percent of the municipalities, while 348 municipalities have been identified as having a deprived and officially Roma minority population (Teşliuc et al. 2016, pp. 31–32).

One of the most significant publications aimed at mapping marginalized areas inhabited by Roma is the result of the SocioRoMap project of the ISPMN in Cluj (Horváth 2017), which mapped and described the “compact” Roma-inhabited areas at the Romanian level. The methodology of the research combined two different approaches: (1) The focus of the research was concentrated on the assessment of the Roma ethnic zones, not on the disadvantaged situation, but on the “compact” ethnic zone. According to SocioRoMap, 2315 compact Roma ethnic zones can be identified in Romania, with a total of approximately 725,000 inhabitants who can be considered as Roma settlements either by self- or by hetero-identification. These streets and districts are mostly small in population, with most of them having fewer than 50 households (Horváth 2017, p. 93).

The study of Roma disadvantages using qualitative methods has been the subject of several anthropological monographs (Engebrihtsen 2007; Fosztó 2009; Olivera 2012; Szeman 2017; Racleş 2021). There have also been studies using a complex methodology, combining the sociological survey method with anthropological fieldwork in an attempt to complement the survey data obtained with questionnaires with qualitative data and interpretations (Bădescu et al. 2007; Fleck and Rughiniş 2008; Cace et al. 2010; Toma et al. 2017; Toma and Fosztó 2018). In an extensive research, Cace et al. (2010) with combined

methods studying urban and rural communities, showed that the employment situation of people in Roma communities can be characterized by low formal employment rates (a low share of those employed with a contract of employment; a lack of work history in the workbook), a high share of those employed in the informal economy or in subsistence agriculture, activities performed without qualification or on the basis of low qualification or non-formal (without supporting documents) based only on experience or tradition. In the Migrom project (see [Toma et al. 2017, 2018](#)), they studied the international migration of Roma in Romania, including the effects of migration to home communities or return migration. This is very useful information that has the social context in which the Roma returned, forced by the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, which we will analyze in this study.

[Crețan et al. \(2022\)](#), using qualitative methods in fieldwork in the rural Banat region of Romania, showed the persistence of prejudice and discrimination against Roma despite a historically multicultural environment and the absence of severe spatial segregation. Their results show that the lack of spatial segregation and a multi-ethnic and/or multilingual environment are not sufficient to prevent social relations affected by prejudice against Roma.

Research focusing mainly on Hungarian-speaking Roma communities was carried out in 2014, where the situation of the Roma was examined in 14 community studies ([Kiss et al. 2009](#); [Kiss 2015](#); [Szabó 2015](#); [Peti and Kiss 2015](#)). The described conditions are still relevant in our field in 2021. The present study also analyzes the possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life strategies of Roma in such settlements.

A major project focusing on the study area of the present research in the last decade is United Networks, a multi-phase project that addressed the social integration of disadvantaged Roma in the eastern part of Transylvania in Covasna Harghita and Mures Counties (see [Rat et al. 2015](#)). The first phase of the United Networks project included research based on macro-statistical data covering small towns and villages. Poverty and deprivation were assessed in the following dimensions: general characteristics of the municipalities, housing deprivation, income deprivation, and unemployment situation; the state of the local economy; social services in the municipality; the school situation of children and related services; the health situation; and the economic profile of the municipalities. Sources for the quantitative analysis include municipal macro statistics, 2011 census data at the municipal level, and some questionnaire surveys. The general conclusion of the research was that segregation processes were relatively more pronounced in the historical Szeklerland, i.e., an occupational and spatial segregation between the local Roma and the Szekler-Hungarian majority developed from early times. Although the traditional occupations of the Roma were instrumentally integrated into the local economy, they were not accompanied by social recognition. Spatially, isolated “settlements” outside the village were mostly found in this historical area (e.g., “Vadgalambfalva” in Porumbeni, Harghita County, and “Cătun” and “Telep” in Borosneu, Domb in Zăbala, and Covasna County, which are also examined in this study). In these cases, the most obstacles to the schooling and school integration of disadvantaged Roma children were found. The results of the research also showed that a second form of segregation processes in Covasna and Harghita can be observed, when the economic and demographic situations of the village are intertwined with the inhabitants of the peripheral, disadvantaged zone, mostly inhabited by Roma, who represent a larger weight of the young population. Thus, spatially, they are closer to the rest of the village, or, the better-off Roma “move in” to the more “central” part of the village. Thus, the spatial manifestation of segregation is less pronounced, but the development of social segregation is also highly dependent on local opinion formers. These phenomena can be seen in the historical salt marshes (“Ólikat” in Sărățel/Sovárad–Mures County), and in Praid and the two Ocna (de Sus and Jos), Corund, Simonești/Siménfalva, and Eted in Harghita County, as well as in Brețcu/Bereck, Zabala, and Ojdula in Covasna County. Foreign employment (temporary migration), combined with local casual work and social benefits, plays an important role in providing income and improving housing conditions for disadvantaged families. Temporary migrants working abroad in places like Hungary and Germany, as well

as temporary workers in agriculture or manufacturing, are no longer unemployed but have modest incomes and precarious employment. The third type of process described by the results of the project is the gradual ethnic segregation and homogenization of villages that had been ethnically mixed for decades in this area, when the Hungarian population almost entirely moved out of the mixed villages (which are peripheral areas with poor accessibility and infrastructure), leaving the Roma population in the majority (see in Hetea, the Vâlcele commune and Székelypeterfalva, the Zăbala commune, and Covasna County). In addition to these, the situation of isolated and inaccessible villages is also present, which further deepens the disadvantage of their situation as they lack the resources to work abroad, are not employed in the region, and face problems in obtaining social benefits in many cases (see also [Veres et al. 2017](#)). The conditions observed during the anthropological fieldwork conducted as a final chord of this project from 2017–2018, and the municipal data collected, formed the point of comparison for the present study to describe the conditions before the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be returned to in the methodology and analysis.

As for the development strategies of these areas and the effectiveness of projects promoting Roma inclusion, the results of the SocioRoMap research ([Horváth 2017](#)) mentioned earlier show that Roma projects in Romania are spatially concentrated in a relatively small number of municipalities. These results ([Kiss 2017](#)) draw attention to one of the peculiarities of the spatial distribution of Roma projects, namely that they disproportionately target urban populations. Looking at the whole database, the same result was obtained, with only 41.7% of Roma projects taking place in rural settlements, while the vast majority of Roma (63%) live in rural areas. In 2011, for example, only 37% lived in urban areas (see [Veres 2015](#), p. 31). In terms of areas of intervention, social programmes were the most common, with more than half of all projects (57.4%) having a social dimension (a project could seek to intervene in more than one area). In addition, educational and cultural programmes were the most common, with both areas mentioned in more than a third of projects. Family planning programmes were the least frequent. The relatively rare housing and economic programmes had the highest average budgets, while cultural and religious projects had the lowest. The most popular specific forms of intervention were individual or family counselling, vocational training, and event organization (see [Kiss 2017](#)).

A few studies and reports have addressed the financial situation of Roma and their livelihood strategies during the pandemic. One of the first reports, which immediately examined the social problems mediated by the curfew restrictions of the COVID-19 Plague, provides the following information.

[Crețan and Light \(2020\)](#) showed that existing prejudices against Roma worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Romanian media victimized Roma, especially in cases where Roma communities would not respect lockdown restrictions, but the phenomenon anyway was not rare in rural areas, nor among the majority population. There have been situations when, because of the infection of a child with COVID-19, local politicians victimized the Roma community, from which environment the child came from, rather than the higher probability that it would have been within the school (see [Matache and Bhabha 2020](#)).

The national ICCV report from Romania shows that the most affected social categories of the Romanian population in 2020, during the pandemic period, were the following: (1) People who became unemployed, legally or not, because they lost their jobs (approximately 250,000 people); (2) Employees who became technically unemployed and had their employment contract suspended (approximately 1-million people); (3) People in informal employment, which is often precarious, has a very low work intensity, and/or includes subsistence farming (we do not know their number); (4) Return migration: people who have recently returned from other countries without income in the country (we do not know their number). ([ICCV 2020](#), p. 22) As the above-mentioned ICCV report shows, while the first two categories of the population benefit from a certain degree of state protection, such as unemployment benefits and technical unemployment, the social risk of survival is very high for the last two categories. The social protection system was intended to

compensate for the loss of primary income through the social insurance and social assistance components (ICCV 2020). However, as we shall see, the way social benefits were provided in Romania (recently modified before the pandemic in order to narrow the circle of beneficiaries) hit the vulnerable population even harder.

Therefore, based on the results and research findings of the last 5–7 years, we have formulated the following research questions, which will be answered in this study.

(1) What changes have occurred in the labour market and living conditions that have had a strong effect among people previously employed in the informal labour market, precarious work, and people of very low work intensity (according to category No. 3 of the ICCV 2020 report) in selected rural Roma communities in Covasna County. Their situation worsened substantially, temporarily, but was this phenomenon variable during the pandemic period?

(2) How did the situation of agricultural workers (usually day labourers in subsistence farming) evolve during the pandemic in the selected local Roma communities?

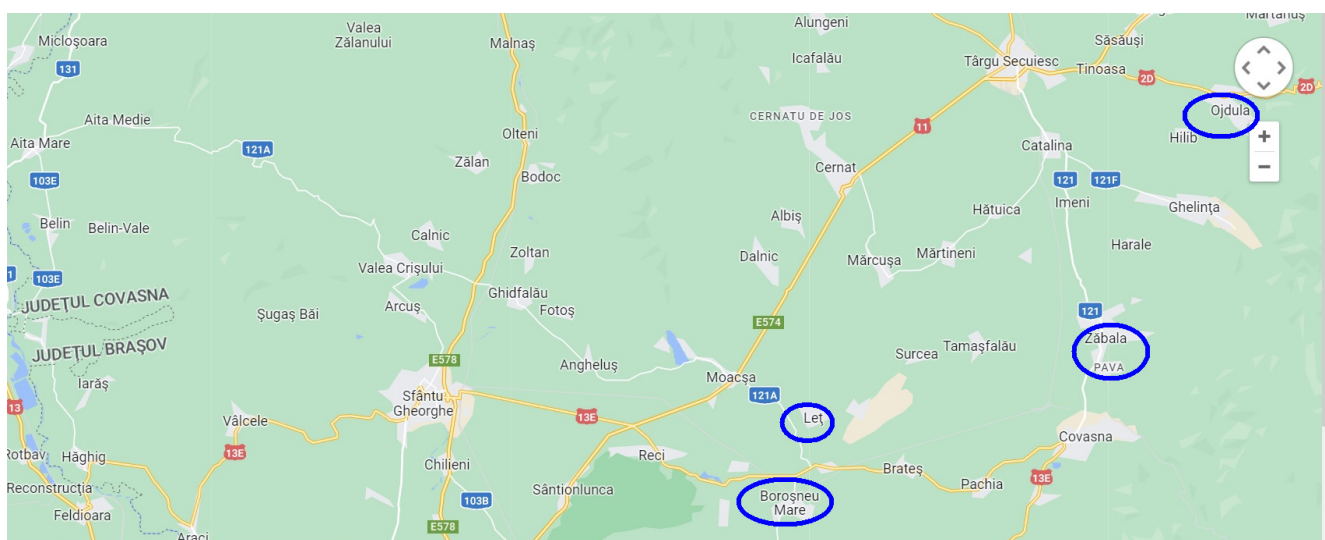
(3) Can return migration phenomena (Category 4 in the ICCV pandemic report) be observed during the pandemic in these communities? How widespread was the phenomenon and what interventions were seen from the authorities and civil society?

### 3. Materials and Methodology

#### 3.1. The Research Field

The research field was chosen to be the Hungarian-speaking Roma population living in Transylvania, mixed with the Hungarian ethnic group, and within the three villages of Borosneu, Ojdula, and Zăbala, which are representative of the rural Roma population of Covasna County. Below, you can read a concise summary of the three fields:

Comuna Borosneu/Borosneu. Located in the central part of the Covasna County (see Figure 1), total population in 2021 was 3186 (see INS 2023), of which there were 1500 Roma inhabitants (estimated by local stakeholders). The Roma population of the municipality of Borosno can be divided into three distinct categories of analysis in terms of spatial location and social position: the Roma in the centre of the municipality, the Dobolii de Sus and Borosneu Mic communities in the segregated area, and a few Roma families scattered in other communes (Leț/Lécfalva, Țofalau/Cófalva). A positive phenomenon in the center of the municipality of Nagyborosnyó is the local memory of a segregated area called Cigányrét (or Gödrök/Groapa), which is no longer spatially segregated or socio-economically marginalized.



**Figure 1.** Map of the selected communes and localities in Covasna County, Romania. Source: Google Maps.

Comuna Ojdula/Ozsdola. The municipality is located in the eastern part of Covasna County, with the majority of the population living in Ozsdola, the center of the municipality, but also including a small village called Hilib. The total population of Ojdula was 3482 (in 2021, [INS 2023](#)), of which 900 were Roma (based on local stakeholder surveys). The Roma population lives in a distinct, segregated group of houses at the end of a street in Ozsdola called Kishilib. According to the data of the mayor's office, there are 860 inhabitants belonging to the Roma community (see <https://ozsdola.ro/index.php/hu/fooldal/bemutakozas>, accessed on 1 February 2023). Kishilib is a typical, isolated Roma settlement in Transylvania and is probably one of the largest, at least among the village communities, in the Covasna–Harghita region/Comuna Zăbala/Zabola. Located in the southeastern part of the county, total population 4332 (in 2021, see [INS 2023](#)), of which Roma comprise 1300 inhabitants (based on local stakeholder interviews). The Roma population lives in four parts of the commune. Most of them live in Pava, which used to be a separate municipality but is now part of Zăbala. Although this part of the municipality has a significant Roma population, there are also a significant number of non-Roma living in modern houses, in well-maintained estates and in well-maintained buildings. The other settlement with a significant population is Domb, which is home to the most deprived Roma. Here, the area is unorganized, with many families belonging to several generations living on a single plot.

### 3.2. Data Sources and Data Analysis Methodology

Quantitative data on the local labour force situation, and the number of welfare benefits, were queried from the Tempo Online database of the National Statistical Institute ([INS 2022](#)) for the period from 2015–2022, and sometimes also for the years 2010–2011, to see the figures for the final years of the global economic crisis.

The qualitative data used as empirical sources come, on the one hand, from secondary analysis of qualitative interviews in the United Networks project (published in [Veres et al. 2017](#)), in which the author did fieldwork in selected localities in this project. During the pandemic period, from April to June 2021, participatory observation was again conducted by the Max Weber Research Center and Babes–Bolyai University of Cluj–Napoca, Hungarian Sociology Department, and more qualitative information on Roma livelihoods and life strategies was gathered during the pandemic period. In total, 15 informal interviews were conducted and many other participatory observation data were gathered.

In each commune, at both times of the field research, informal, and sometimes formal, five recorded interviews were conducted with various local stakeholders who have working relationships or other formal and informal contacts with members of Roma communities. Typically, contacts included representatives of the municipality, social workers, priests, school mediators, nurses, and local entrepreneurs, including farmers. Informal discussions were also held with several people in each Roma community surveyed.

Quantitative data were analyzed in time series graphical forms to determine trends over time, in the number of employees, but also in the evolution of social benefits, both at county and local level, where they were given. Rates were used as a proportion of the total population or working age labor resources.

In the case of qualitative, anthropological data, the study processed data from participatory observation and informal and formal interviews in three localities: Boroşneu, Ojdula, and Zăbala. By processing qualitative data, the occupational and housing situation of Roma families were included in a two-dimensional typology, which had the following dimensions. The first dimension was defined according to their relation to the labour market, legally, i.e., formal–informal work, but also spatially, the work activity being local or through migration. The other dimension represents the material and income situation of the family, which we defined as good, average, and poor/poor. Based on information from interviews and from the participative observation, we included the local Roma communities, side by side, from each neighbourhood/part of the village; we grouped the entire Roma population in this typology. In the next stage, it was analyzed in each category in

which a significant number of people were included, according to their survival strategies during the pandemic, corroborating both quantitative and qualitative data.

Limitation of the data: The empirical data, both macrostatistical and qualitative, have national and local relevance at the level of Romania; they cannot be extrapolated to the whole CEE context. Moreover, the presented typology and livelihood strategies may have a broad validity at least for the Romanian rural Roma population living in total or partial segregation at the local level.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Description of the Social Integration Conditions in Roma Settlements

The Roma population of the settlements studied can be divided into a number of groups according to the degree of spatial segregation and social integration. These are factors that determine living conditions and livelihood strategies in the COVID-19 pandemic. One population category, the relatively well-integrated (1), is partially integrated in terms of housing, work, and schooling (2), with only one aspect considered well-integrated and one or two aspects mixed or less integrated. Finally, we can identify groups of less integrated people, who are not considered well-integrated in any one respect, but only mixed or less integrated in all dimensions.

The Roma population of the commune of Borosneu Mare, as shown in the typology (Table 1), is highly heterogeneous both in size and in economic and cultural characteristics. Three of the six settlements in the municipality have a significant Roma community, but overall, about half of the population of the commune is of Roma origin. The largest settlement, the Borosneu Mare village, has a mostly well-integrated Roma community in all three aspects. In terms of labour market integration, the Roma population in the center of the municipality can be divided into two parts, with a part of them working in the informal labour market through temporary migration. Here, about half of the approximately 1000 Roma individuals self-reported to be integrated into the labour market are of mixed labour market integration. The most important characteristic of the Roma community in this village is that they have moved into the village over the last decades and lead a lifestyle very similar to that of non-Roma Hungarians.

**Table 1.** Integration of the Roma communities studied, typology.

Dimensions	Degree of Integration	
	High	Low
Housing Spatial location, infrastructure	Borosneu Mare—communal centre Zăbala-Pava	
Labour market situation	Borosneu Mare—communal centre (500)	Ojdula-Kishilib Zăbala-Pava Borosneu Mare—communal centre (500)
School integration: participation of children	Borosneu Mare—village marginés Zăbala-Pava	Borosneu Mic Doboli de Sus Ojdula-Kishilib Zăbala-Domb

Source: Local fieldwork, (Own preparation).

The Roma living in segregated communities of a less well-integrated type total about 300 persons living in settlements on Borosneu Mic hill and Doboli Roof (Dobolyi tető), respectively, with very poor infrastructure conditions. The streets in these villages are in a poor state of repair, unpaved. They live in “abject poverty.” As you can see, this represents a minority of the local Roma population.

The poorest part of the population of the Ojdula commune lives in a relatively small area in the village part, named Kishilib. This community of nearly 900 people lives in poor housing conditions. The settlement follows the end of a street in the village in an irregular



order. Its ownership is not regularized, and the street (except for the connecting part to the main road of the village) is not regulated at all, not paved, not asphalted, and not paved with no civilized traffic in rainy weather. The condition of the houses varies, although they are rather wooden. The quality and comfort of the housing is very poor. Around 95% of them are not equipped with all comforts, i.e., without a bathroom and internal toilet. In terms of size, they are mostly one-bedroom flats and very densely built-in. However, almost all households have piped water, but mostly in the yard. A major problem is that in summer, the water flow is insufficient. The vast majority of houses have adequate heating systems (at least functional wood-burning stoves).

In Zabola municipality, 415 persons in the entire municipality considered themselves Roma in the 2011 census, including the Zăbala community and the Roma in Pava. However, according to stakeholders interviewed from the community, the number of people considered Roma by the Hungarian population is significantly higher than the number recorded in the census, with roughly one-third of the municipality's population constituting the Roma community.

Pava, a formerly separate settlement in Zăbala, is, therefore, not a segregated area, but a part of a village where many Roma live. Although this part of the commune has a significant Roma population (some interviewees said that it is Roma-majority), there are also a significant number of non-Roma. The Roma living in Pava have good housing conditions living in modern houses in well-established land tenure and well-maintained buildings. The other settlement with a significant population is Domb, where the Roma live in the most deprived conditions. Here, the area is unorganized, with many families belonging to several generations living on a single plot. In addition, in the central part of Zabala village, in the streets near the school (about 20 houses) and in Hegymegett area, there are also a number of Roma families living in mixed environments with non-Roma. In material terms, while the most prosperous groups have exceeded the living conditions of the non-Roma middle classes, the poorest continue to live in high levels of extreme poverty. The differentiation in material status has also resulted in spatial and social segregation, with the result that the Roma in Zabolai are currently divided into three social strata, the main determinant of which is material income status. Accordingly, they can be divided into good, medium, and poor.

#### 4.2. Changes in Employment and Social Situation during the Years of the Pandemic, According to Official Statistics

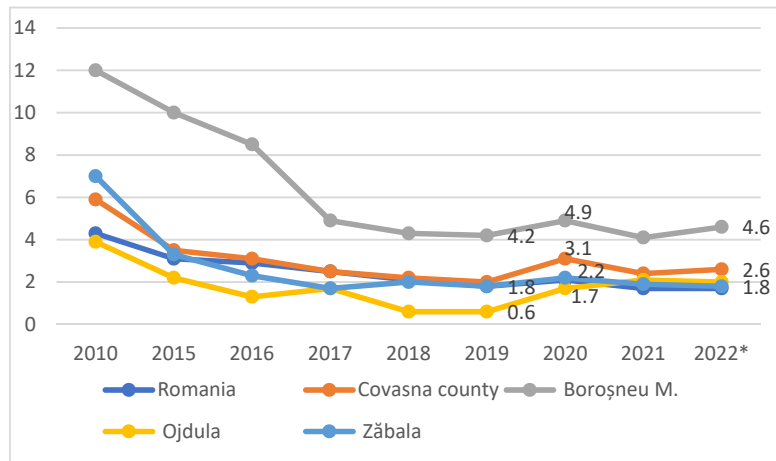
The impact of the pandemic on the labour market situation and employment is first examined on the basis of official statistics. For the three selected communes, and for Covasna County as a whole, we first examine the evolution of the number of employed persons to see if there was a change in the number of employed persons during the pandemic years. As shown in Table 2, at the Covasna County level, a small decrease of 5 percent from 50,783 to 48,381 persons was observed, which could have been even larger during the months of the pandemic because the data are annual averages. However, by 2021, the decline had moderated and the number of underemployed was only 1 percent below the 2019 level. At the level of the municipalities, we also observe a decrease in 2020 from the 2019 level, mainly for the communes of Ojdula and Zabala, by about 10 percent. However, by 2021, Boroşneu Mare and Zăbala had increased employment, exceeding the 2019 level, while in Ojdula, the 2020 level remained at 169–167 persons.

**Table 2.** Average number of employees by counties and localities.

	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Covasna county	40,858	47,500	47,437	49,121	50,570	50,783	48,381	50,234
Boroşneu M.	67	88	85	80	85	85	89	127
Ojdula	82	127	148	193	193	187	169	167
Zăbala	167	191	181	199	256	242	218	257

Source: Tempo online database (INS 2022).

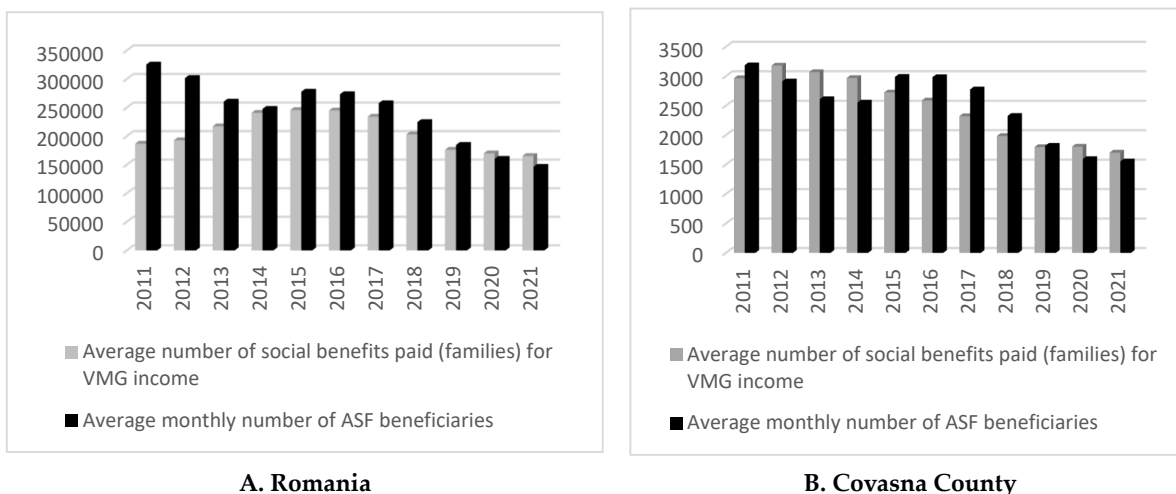
The decrease in the number of employees in 2020 reflects an increase in the local unemployment rate, which was higher than the national level. In turn, these population categories received unemployment benefits from the state, in two forms, as seen in the ICCV (2020) report (see Figure 2).



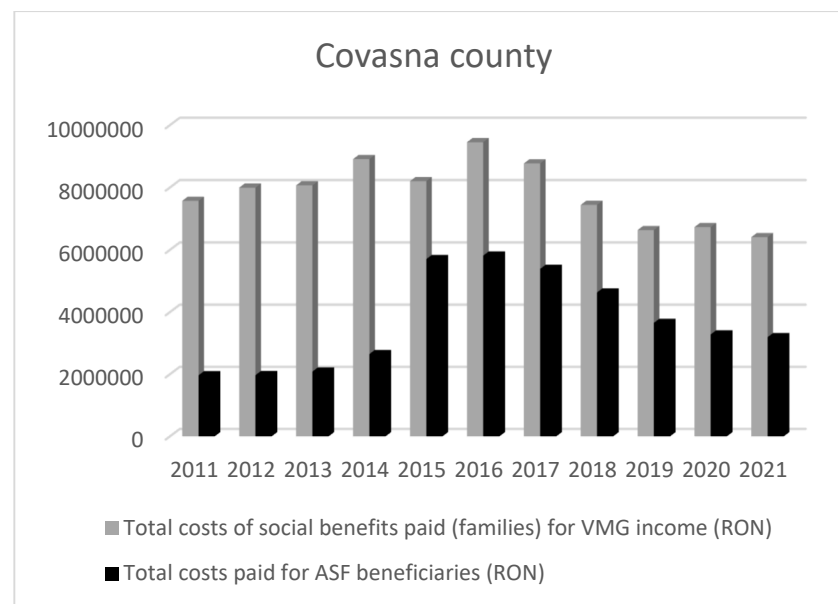
**Figure 2.** Ratio of registered unemployed at the end of the month to total labour resources, by county and localities, 2010, 2015–2022. Source: Tempo online database, own calculations. (INS 2022).

However, the disadvantaged, precarious work, and non-employed part of the population or returning migrants did not receive unemployment benefits. In their case, we examined what happened to social benefits and their number in the county and in the municipalities. Both national and county-level data show that the two forms of social benefits that help the disadvantaged, social benefits ((families) for granted minimum income (VMG) and allocation for sustaining families (ASF), see Popescu et al. 2016) neither in terms of number of beneficiary families nor in terms of amount, did not increase during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As shown in Figures 3 and 4, the number of beneficiaries in 2020 and 2021 was significantly lower for both benefits in Romania and Covasna County than in 2019, and the amounts did not increase in these years. So, the state did not react sensitively to the pandemic years for the two most vulnerable social categories. However, even applying the tightened criteria in 2019, it gave fewer benefits to those who were already falling off from several types of casual work, as both tourism and some agricultural jobs and domestic help declined.



**Figure 3.** Average number of social benefits (families) for Granted minimum income (VMG) and Allocation for sustaining families (ASF), 2011–2021. Source: Tempo online database, own calculations. (INS 2022).



**Figure 4.** Total costs of social benefits paid (families) for granted minimum income (VMG) and Allocation for sustaining families (ASF), in RON, Covasna County, 2011–2021.

#### 4.3. The Labour Market Situation and Livelihood Strategies of Roma in the Three Rural Settlements of Covasna during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Roma in the three communes can be well classified into a typology according to some aspects of their labour market situation and livelihood strategies. On this basis, it is possible to assess and analyze how their situation changed and what challenges they faced during the pandemic. The typology is based on two dimensions: the degree and form of labour market integration. In the first half of the spectrum, there are local permanent employees or self-employed people working full time. In the second half, there is seasonal work abroad, legally or informally, followed by low-intensity work, whether it is agriculture, broom-making, or selling mushrooms and fruit to the population. The other dimension is income and, based on that, the financial situation and housing conditions. In the field formed according to these two dimensions, the Roma communities of the three municipalities can be positioned as follows:

Table 3 shows that the majority of local Roma communities are clustered in the lower right boxes of the model, where insufficient income and low-intensity work meet, and in the adjacent categories. In more detail, along the typology developed in Table 3, we would characterize the labour market and material situation and survival strategies of Roma communities during the COVID-19 epidemic. We have described the following numerically relevant groups, distinguishing 5 major categories, denoted by the numbers of the scheme above (A, B, C, I, II, II):

A.I. Locally employed well-off. This category includes a significant part of the Roma population of Zăbala–Pava. Especially the best-off Roma in Pava have engaged in self-employment activities that have enabled many of them to become entrepreneurs. As a result of these changes, the number of people receiving social benefits has recently decreased. The extensive forests around the village provide an excellent platform for this activity and, for the time being, forest owners do not prevent it. In particular, the collection of cap mushrooms (*Boletus edulis*, known as medvegomba or hirip by locals) is considered to be profitable. Mushroom picking takes several forms, with some people setting off on foot in the early morning to the forests to hand over the mushrooms collected in the afternoon to the picking contractors, and others going by car. While the mushrooms are sold exclusively to collection centers, some of the forest fruit is sold to locals. Sales to local non-Roma have been very limited during the more severe lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is precisely the needier who have been deprived of income.

**Table 3.** Typology of the Roma communities studied according to labour market integration and income and housing situation.

Dimension of financial situation	The Level of Labour Market Integration		
	A. Local legalized employment	B. Partially legalized work abroad	C. Low intensity, informal work
I. Good income, good housing, integrated environment	Zăbala–Pava, Zabala-center Few persons from other communities	Borosneu Mare	
II. Acceptable income, slightly deprived housing	Borosneu Mare—	Ojdula–Kishilib (600) Borosneu Mare Zabala–Pava	Borosneu Mic (100) Doboli de Sus (100) Zabala–Pava
III. Insufficient income, deprived housing, segregated environment		Borosneu Mic Doboli de Sus Ojdula–Kishilib (300) Zăbala–Domb	Zăbala–Domb Borosneu Mic (200) Doboli de Sus (200) Ojdula–Kishilib (100)

The entrepreneurial activities of local Roma can also be placed on the formal–informal scale. While a formal general store entrepreneur could be identified in the village of Zabala–Pava, semi-informal or informal versions of the trade are practiced by a relatively large number of local Roma, both locally in Romania and abroad, in combination with temporary migration. According to the village opinion, these activities represent the relatively good economic situation of a part of the Roma population in Pava.

BI. Employed abroad in good situation. This category includes Roma living in the interior of the commune of Borosneu Mare.

The mainstay of the livelihood of the Roma in Borosneu Mare is guest work abroad, which is increasingly not done with a legal work permit. The most popular destinations are England, Germany, and Hungary. The people living in the Borosneu Mare commune center are considered to be in a particularly advantageous financial situation in the area due to the income from foreign guest work.

BII. Employed abroad, medium income and material situation This includes the majority of Ojdula–Kishilib and a small proportion of Borosneu Mare village residents and Zabala–Pava residents. The population of Ojdula, especially of Roma ethnicity, is about 70% (according to the 2015 local survey, see [Veres et al. 2017](#)). The income of the Roma population tends to come from seasonal activities abroad. Working-age people often go abroad to work, mainly in Hungary (especially in Northeast Hungary) in agriculture. Usually only the husband leaves, but sometimes both parents leave with children for 4–6 months.

CII. Low intensity, informal work, medium income, and material situation. This category includes mainly the poorer part of the Roma population of Zabala–Pava, but also a small group of the Roma population of Borosneu Mic and Doboli de Sus.

The poorer part of the local Roma is also engaged in mushroom and forest fruit picking, but as they do not have cars, they are not as efficient in travel, transport, and marketing as families with more resources, and their income is therefore more modest. Mushrooms and forest fruits are seasonal products. When they are not, they work in agriculture or domestic work, informally as day labourers, but these are also intermittent.

Those who work locally as day labourers—i.e., informally—are spoken of negatively and skeptically by respondents. The majority of them say that Roma do not like the full-time, strenuous work involved in day labour, so they do not go to day labour very often. Nevertheless, these findings of the majority (non-Roma) respondents are rather seen as a consequence of prejudiced attitudes, since the total number of mentions seems to indicate that day labour—including various small- and large-scale backyard jobs, cleaning, and washing, in addition to agricultural work—is important for Roma people’s income.

However, this income-earning activity was reduced during periods of strict lockdown, as it was forbidden for foreigners to enter other dwellings or to stay there for long periods.

B–C.III Low intensity, informal work, low income, and material situation.

All three municipalities have the worst income and housing conditions. Some of them are temporary migrants, the rest live from low-intensity work.

The Roma living in the settlements of Doboli/Feldobolyi and Borosneu Mic constitute almost the entire social assistance population of the commune. They have a high rate of illiteracy and live in unsafe living conditions from a health and epidemiological point of view in one or two-room mud houses built close to each other with very small floor space. The legal status of the buildings and land is unclear, and there is no public water or electricity supply. Some of them have illegally installed electricity.

Their livelihoods are based on various types of social benefits, to which we will return shortly. In addition to social assistance, people living in the Doboli/Feldoboly and Borosneu Mic settlements pursue income supplementing strategies such as day labour, collecting various recyclable materials and trading in other collectible and saleable goods.

The Roma community of Zabala–Domb is a community in deep poverty similar to the above, and its situation is exacerbated by the fact that, due to the lack of land for housing, as several families live under the same house number, the municipality interprets the national laws and regulations in such a way that only one family living under a house number on a plot of land is granted assistance, the others are not considered eligible due to the lack of legal housing conditions. Thus, the majority of the segregated, deprived Roma settlements receive neither VMG nor ASF-type support, but only the amount of the *alocația de stat pentru copii* (approximately EUR 120 up to the age of 2, EUR 50 between 2 and 18), which for many younger children, without other support or income, only allows them to live a minimum subsistence level life without starving to death.

#### *4.4. Survival Strategies and Options in the COVID-19 Pandemic*

In the following, we will review the options and survival strategies that emerged in the Roma communities studied when they lost their jobs or income opportunities were reduced as a collateral consequence of the restrictions caused by the pandemic.

As it is known in Romania, a strict curfew was introduced in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with restaurants, schools, and universities closed. People's social contacts were severely restricted, and a person was only allowed to walk freely in the street around his or her place of residence. Otherwise, he or she had to have a written certificate to go to his or her place of work or to visit an elderly family member, etc. for care or assistance. In the autumn of 2020 and during 2021, restrictions were not so strict and the catering trade was largely open, but there were some difficulties. As many forms of formal and informal employment were temporarily discontinued, especially in 2020, different survival strategies emerged for the different labour market categories identified in the previous section, which we will review.

AI. Locally employed well-off population. Among those employed as employees in the formal labour market, only a few were Roma in all three municipalities. Of these, those who were temporarily unemployed were provided with two types of state support: the classic *ajutor somaj* (which in turn was extremely *alac-sony*), and the *somaj tehnic*, who were only temporarily laid off and entitled to 75% of their previous net wage from state assistance.

This group, on the other hand, includes Roma who were self-employed and self-employed under a legalized or semi-legalized system. This group survived on their reserves from March–April 2020 despite declining product sales due to their relatively good financial situation. However, after very strict initial restrictions, mushroom and forest fruit picking resumed from the beginning of summer 2020. Sales to the general public were hampered, but the products were taken over by the collection centers. Thus, those who had the resources to meet the requirements for the way the products were collected and

transported were able to earn an income that was less than before the pandemic, but which enabled them to survive on a daily basis.

B.I-II. *Employed abroad, medium, or good income and material situation.* This category of employee suffered perhaps the most severe income loss in the first half of the pandemic. The pandemic that raged in Italy and Spain made it impossible for Roma from Romania to take up certain jobs in many areas, with strict curfews and the closure of several service sectors. In addition, hawking and social contacts abroad were also reduced. The Roma who were then forced to return from abroad were left without income, but local authorities were usually unwilling to provide them with assistance. This was a particularly significant phenomenon in the case of Ojdula, where the majority of Roma of working age were excluded from the social assistance system because they were living temporarily abroad and the mayor's office was aware of their income from work, even abroad. Some have old, second-hand cars and are excluded from social assistance because they own them or have saved money in the bank, which they put aside seasonally.

The higher-earning group in this category lived on their previous reserves for several months, while the middle- or lower-earning group became completely destitute in a month.

As we have seen from the county data (Figures 3 and 4), local authorities have not been adaptive to the situation at local level, and the number of social assistance payments to help people returning from abroad due to the pandemic did not increase in 2020 and 2021. Families in temporary financial difficulties and on the verge of starvation were assisted by the actions of civil society organizations, where they existed. We are specifically aware of the relief operations on the ground by the charitable organizations Diakonia and Caritas Alba Iulia, whose volunteers distributed food. In addition, temporarily, in some municipalities, the municipalities, in collaboration with NGOs or independently, have launched such food aid operations. However, there were also problems in determining the scope of eligibility.

CII, B-C.III *Low intensity, informal work, medium or low income and material situation.* In the commune of Borosneu Mare, the Roma in Doboli de sus and in Borosneu Mic are the poorest, especially in this settlement, where they cannot even afford food. These are the communities from which the social assistance recipients and the people living on the daily subsistence allowance come.

Daily labour has been reduced even more than usual because of the distancing encouraged in the first part of the pandemic, but informal discussions with local entrepreneurs have shown that agriculture does not require much labour, as everything is mechanized, so that 100–200 hectares can be cultivated by a few people with a few good machines. The informal, unskilled day labour done by the Roma is only an additional function, in the case of post-machine harvesting and sorting. There is also the possibility of day labourers helping out in small backyard farms and domestic work, which is limited by the social and physical distance promoted during the pandemic, further reducing the income-earning opportunities for this category.

One of the prerequisites for receiving social assistance (ASF, VMG, see above) is to have an identity card with a local address, which the social worker or community mediators can help you obtain. A local address requires proof of some form of legal residence or housing and not all people in need have this. During fieldwork in 2021, there were a total of two families in the commune that did not have the necessary documentation.

In addition to the two main forms of social assistance described above, the aforementioned child raising allowance (*alocație de stat pentru creșterea copilului*) also contributes on a conditional basis: if the child has a birth certificate, an amount of about EUR 50 per child per month until the child is 18 years old, not only for the needy. In addition, during the winter months, a fuel subsidy is available from the local municipality: so-called “wood money,” to be spent on firewood for the disadvantaged population.

In the commune of Borosneu, especially in Doboli de Sus and a significant part of the Gypsy community in Borosneu, Mic had access to these allowances. Thus, an average of 151 family support allowance cases (ASF) and around 48 social benefits for VMG were

paid. In the other two municipalities, the number of families receiving at least one of these benefits was much lower, with 34–39 in Ojdula and around 70 in Zabala, although in both cases, particularly during the months of the pandemic with more limited access and economic constraints, many more would have been needed.

## 5. Discussion

During the years of the COVID-19 pandemic there were changes in the material and income situation of people previously employed in the informal labour market, precarious work, and people of very low work intensity (according to Category 3 of the [ICCV 2020](#) report) in selected rural Roma communities in Covasna County. The work situation worsened substantially, temporarily, but this phenomenon was variable during the pandemic period, especially due to the recommendations of physical distancing, and the possibility to sell collected products (mushrooms and berries) directly to wealthier people in the localities or doing household care work was restricted.

Even in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was found that the policies of local authorities in Romania were inadequate in many respects to address the problems of local Roma communities ([Crețan and Light 2020](#)). The primary option for improving the situation of disadvantaged populations, the social support system in Romania as a whole, neither at the national, regional (Covasna), nor local level, has not been flexible and responsive to the changing social needs and increasing vulnerability created by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the number of social benefits was not increased for a long time before the pandemic ([Popescu et al. 2016](#); [Zamfir 2018](#)). In addition, in municipalities with Roma communities, in many cases, the formulation of eligibility for social benefits was biased and interpreted in a restrictive way that excluded hundreds of eligible people; in many cases, the majority of eligible people. The bureaucratic complication and digitalization of social means-testing took place before the pandemic in 2019, as the Romanian state sought to narrow the pool of people eligible for social assistance. Some of the restrictions were simply a procedural reason to digitize the application and the assessment. Thus, Roma who were often illiterate and without digital means, and whose housing status was not sorted out administratively according to electronic registers (they could not legally prove their local residence), had their social applications rejected for simple bureaucratic reasons. However, during a social anecdote, it was revealed, as we observed during fieldwork, that these Roma families live in their small houses in, for example, the Zabala–Domb settlement. However, the local mayor's office did not number the houses (citing land registration reasons), so most of the houses are treated as if they do not exist. The argument is disingenuous, since in towns there are whole blocks of houses with the same number, and a solution could be found in the villages, but so far there has been no serious attempt to do so.

The situation of agricultural workers, usually day labourers in subsistence farming in local Roma communities, has gradually changed in recent years, but not primarily due to the effects of the pandemic. It has been mainly due to the changing structure of agricultural property, the formation of medium-sized estates of over 50 hectares, and in parallel to the mechanization of agricultural work on these medium-sized or large farms (see [Kiss and Csák 2016](#)), where the role of unskilled agricultural day labourers has become increasingly restricted and complementary only.

In all three local communities, there are families practicing temporary migration, with income coming from work abroad. During the pandemic period, return migration phenomena can be observed (Category 4 in the [ICCV 2020](#) pandemic report). The return phenomenon in the first half of the pandemic year (March–July 2020) was relatively large ([ICCV 2020](#)), most families returned and those who had to go to agricultural work at the end of March were prevented from leaving the country. The livelihood situation of returned families, who had no accumulated savings, became dramatic. Many families were helped by charities, and in Zabala's case, by the municipality, to provide daily food for the families. However, the official social protection system remained rigid and unadapted, and the

funds were not supplemented for the pandemic period. So, the social problems temporarily increased in the pandemic were not reflected in national, regional, or local social spending. However, this return migration phenomenon resumed in autumn 2020 and in 2021, and people previously involved in the migration phenomenon resumed former activities in other countries. Thus, the situation returned “to normal” under the given conditions.

As mentioned in recent studies, how isolation measures work to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic, several anti-Roma discriminatory situations have occurred, both through victimization (see [Matache and Bhabha 2020](#); [Crețan and Light 2020](#)) or due to prejudice working, even in multicultural and multilingual environments ([Crețan et al. 2023](#)).

It should be stressed, in line with the [EUAFR \(2020\)](#) report, that combating the unintended consequences of restrictive measures during the pandemic requires both immediate policy measures to help those targeted during a crisis, but also long-term policy measures targeting Roma. Immediate measures should compensate for the suffering and deficits in material, income, and housing conditions. We can also see from our results that the Pandemic has revealed a critical gap between the scale of local needs and the capacity of authorities to address them ([EUAFR 2020](#)). Moreover, in Romania, the very varied situations at local level make it more difficult to implement strategies outlined at EU or national level.

In line with the World Health Organization (WHO), which, according to the report ([EUAFR 2020](#)), recommends that, to prevent transmission and protect human health during all outbreaks, including COVID-19. 1. Relevant public authorities must take urgent measures to ensure safe water, sanitation, and waste management in close cooperation with Roma. To these measures, we can also add the provision of home isolation facilities for families with very small dwellings (one room per family) and the relaxation of administrative formalities regarding housing documents in order to successfully access social benefits.

## 6. Conclusions

As pointed out by [Berescu et al. \(2021\)](#), our results also underline that in pandemic crisis periods, at least in post-peripheral countries like CEE, social policies and crisis-specific policies influenced by biased political relations ([Crețan et al. 2023](#)) fail, or do not intend to help vulnerable groups, proportionally to the level of distress. Thus, disadvantaged Roma communities in CEE have ended up in even more extreme, vulnerable, precarious situations. Often, these have become more pronounced compared to the average level of the society, we have seen in our research.

In addition, although EU reports ([EUAFR 2020](#)) or other studies ([Crețan and Light 2020](#); [ICCV 2020](#)) have drawn attention to the increased vulnerability of the employment and income situation of the Roma population in Europe. Moreover, the results of our study showed that precarious work categories, both self-employed and agricultural laborers, among others, that are left without work or with sufficient income may be excluded from social benefits, especially when budget revenues decrease, as a result of biased local political power structure and populist approaches (see [Matache and Bhabha 2020](#); [Waldron 2021](#)).

As policy recommendations, additional strategies and measures need to be developed to ensure that state and local authorities, under pandemic crisis conditions, implement measures that are proportionate to the degree of exposure and deprivation of social groups. Otherwise, vulnerable social groups will be subject to new forms of discrimination and the level of material inequality and opportunities for self-realization or segregation will increase. (See also [Cârstocea 2022](#); [Crețan et al. 2022](#)).

Return migration phenomena, associated with pandemic or health crises, must be supported, and treated with special attention. As shown in studies ([Anghel et al. 2016](#); [Anghel and Foszto 2022](#)) among the young generation of returned Roma (and non-Roma) migrants in Romania, the previous patterns of local relations, everyday habits, and communicational styles are on changing process. That is why, in the case of returned migrants in pandemic times, specific reintegration strategies and policies need to be developed, for which local communities are not yet prepared. In addition, the large loss of young labor



force in Romania is a big problem, the need to keep the returned migrants must be an important imperative.

Building on the findings of Waldron (2021), who points out that existing approaches have been inattentive to the dynamics of the housing system and the effects on housing insecurity, local politics, and increasing inequalities. Waldron suggests a focus on “housing dissatisfaction” to capture how deepening housing precarity and housing inequalities influence social attitudes, values, and policy preferences. Comparative studies, although useful, have neglected the processes of change within housing systems and the political outcomes of housing inequality. Thus, the need for locally focused research was seen, as were the results of our research, which showed that housing segregation and housing insecurity have effects on how vulnerable communities are socially integrated, problems that surface in crisis situations such as pandemics.

The results of our research can be a foundation for future applied research agendas, which focus on identifying complex approaches in which vulnerable communities, in the event of health and isolation crises, can be protected from biased or populist local policies, and the resilience of these local communities—Roma or non-Roma—can be ensured.

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