

# Stories of upward social mobility and migration in one Romanian commune.

## On the emergence of “rurban” spaces in migrant-sending communities

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to explore how international migration changed rural communities and social mobility trajectories. I show how the intense structural changes following the socio-economic transition in Romania supported the emergence and growth of labour migration. I look at migration instances that reveal positive changes of the quality of life, housing, educational and occupational opportunities of migrants. I posit that migration changes social mobility trajectories and shapes “rurban” villages where standards of living and lifestyles merge old and new ways of life. These communities gradually begin to resemble more to host countries and to urban localities in Romania than to the traditional rural spaces.*

*Key words:* communism, transition, community development, labor force migration, social mobility, rurbinization, rurban communities

### 1. Introduction

This paper explores selected cases of migrants and histories of international migration in order to reveal some insights of migration and upward social mobility. I studied migration instances that revealed positive changes of the quality of life, educational and occupational opportunities. I elaborate on Mauss-inspired idea that migration is a “*total social fact*” (Rotariu and Mezei, 1999, p. 5, Sandu, 2010, p. 35) changing social mobility trajectories and shaping “*rurban*” villages. Borrowing from Parsons’ concept - “*rurbinization*”, rurban communities are the rural socio- geographic spaces where styles of life and the standard of living have changed so much that they resemble those in urban localities (Parsons, 1949, p. 435). This change is made possible not only by the accumulation of capital but also by exposure to western ideas and lifestyles that

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eventually build new mindsets. It is actually the consequence of a transnational life implying living in “social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders” (Basch Glick Schiller and Blanc-Szanton 1994, p. 6).

This paper is organized as follows: after the introduction, I have included a theoretical section and the methodological approach. The next chapter presents the community profile. To continue, I have selected two stories of upward social mobility: the first refers to housing improvements and the emergence of the Italian/ new neighborhood in the commune and the latter is the story of a young girl who first worked abroad when she was still underage. I have chosen her case to illustrate an example of what may soon be a new generation of migrants. The last chapter is an excerpt from my field journal, including some thoughts related to my research in Icușești commune.

The Occidental Mirage has long fascinated many Europeans living behind the Iron Curtain. In Romania, some people had been hoping for a chance to leave the country long before the fall of the communist regime that strictly supervised migration. A few were secretly listening to foreign radio stations such as Voice of America or Radio Free Europe and plotting to flee the severe economic deprivation. Soon after the fall of communism the opening of the borders made it possible for many to overcome the difficult transition process and to experience the much desired Western life. For the past decade, Italy and Spain have been the main destination countries for the labor migrants, accounting for more than 70% of the Romanian presence abroad (Sandu, 2009)<sup>1</sup>. In 2011, approximately 10% of the Romanian population was working abroad (~2-2.5 million migrants) (IMAS, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. In April 2011, 20% of all Romanians stated that at least one household member was working abroad and 66% noted to have had a migrant relative (*ibid*). At the same time, as much as 90% of all Romanians had a positive opinion of their fellow citizens working abroad (*id.*). For the last two decades, in Romania, migration has gradually become part of the everyday family life, the topic of newspapers, politics, opinion polls and statistics.

International migration has been closely linked with the transition process in Romania. Some of the first migrants have been commuters, laid off industrial workers or former internal migrants whose lifestyle, social and economic status has been significantly changed by migration. Many workers lost their jobs when large enterprises were restructured and construction sites closed. The drop in the number of employees by almost 50% in the last 20 years is one of the clearest figures evidencing the impact of transition. “A brief assessment of the economic environment shortly after the 1989 Revolution against the communist regime would reveal among costs of the economic transition an approximately 100 EUR

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<sup>1</sup> Sandu estimates Romanian presence abroad to 2.8 million persons (Sandu, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Acknowledgments to IMAS Research Institute for the openness to support this study by including a migration section in the monthly omnibus survey.

gross medium salary in the early 90s, a GDP decline to -12.9% in 1992 and a 256.1% inflation rate in 1993. As economic distress and job insecurity became widespread, those whose social position deteriorated were among the first international migrants” (Alexandru, 2011). The issue of a large migration potential among the categories most affected by the long and frustrating transition to democratic capitalism is in line with other studies targeting the former communist space in Central and Eastern Europe such as the research of Okolski (2004) or Marokvasic (1999).

## **2. Theoretical framework**

In Romania, during the first decade after the fall of communism, migration remained a somewhat silent social reality. Academic interest and policy oriented research have gradually begun to develop after 2000. Some studies are general assessments of migration, setting the benchmark for a new discipline in Romania: Diminescu and Lăzăroiu, 2002; Lazaroiu, 2003; Sandu, 2006). Others are in-depth explorations of selected subjects: network ties (Potot, 2000), transnationalism and transnational practices (Sandu, 2000; Cingolani, 2009), women migration (Castagnone, Eve, Petrillo, Piperno and Chaloff, 2007; Vlase, 2008), trafficking in human beings as failed circular migration (Lăzăroiu, 2002), return migration (Ambrosini, Karin, Giovanni and Radu, 2011), and remittances (Pop, 2006). The importance of studying social mobility in the context of migration is straightforward if we consider that the former is both a considerable motivational factor for migration and a consequence of this process. Although social mobility is generally included in Romanian international migration studies, there are few papers exploring this subject in particular<sup>3</sup>. An interesting understanding of migration and social mobility is included in a paper on internal migration in Romania. The author points that geographical mobility and occupational changes often involve “a change of the migrant’s position in the social space” (Sandu, 1984, pp. 22-23). In fact, as Sandu notes, interpretations regarding migration ought to include social mobility (Sandu, 1984, p. 19). My understanding of social mobility in this study is in line with Sorokin’s definition of the process referring to “[...] any transition of an individual or social object or value-anything that has been created or modified by human activity-from one social position to another” (Sorokin, 1959, p.133). The focus of this paper will be on changes of standards of living, housing, occupational, financial changes and human capital. Irrespectively of the changes involved, economic migration is ultimately the result between the various differences in the quality of life from one area to another, as Rotariu and Mezei (1999) emphasize. Migration is generally guided by the quest for a better life

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<sup>3</sup> In 2011 and 2012 I have published two other papers exploring some facets of migration and social mobility (Alexandru, 2011; Alexandru, 2012).

which oftentimes means a better job (CURS, 2005)<sup>4</sup>. According to macro theories such as neoclassical economics, dual labor market or world system theory, differences between capital rich states and poorer states as regards wealth or the structure of the labor market are the main drivers of migration (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, Taylor, 1993; Skeldon, 1997; Stalker, 2001). It is these differences that allow the rapid accumulation of remittances and migration savings and upward social mobility in home countries. At the micro level one of the theories explaining migration causality– “the new economics of migration” (Stark and Bloom, 1985)– builds on concepts such as, family choice, risk diversification or relative deprivation, moving the focus from state actors to individual actors. According to the relative deprivation thesis, a person migrates “to change his relative position in one reference group, or to change his reference group” (*ibid*, p. 173).

In Romania, as international mobility developed, successful migrants and Western societies became reference groups for both intending and actual migrants. In migrant-sending villages, migrants’ subjective status positions closely depend on the investment patterns of their peer internationally mobile villagers. Apart from their utility function, building tall houses or buying expensive cars with the money saved from migration is also the result of a relative self-evaluation of one’s status. Frustration as regards individual accomplishments from migration may lead to strategies and investment patterns aimed at reaching a higher social status. As for the lifestyles allowed by the higher financial status of migrants and their families, its roots are in the host countries. Working “there” and envisaging a return “here” is probably what supported the emergence of „rurban” communities in Romania. The concept makes reference to Parson’s observation on “rurbanization”, a process describing how mechanization and land accumulation have gradually led to American farmers’ turning their agricultural activity into small businesses and the adoption of an urban lifestyle (Parsons, 1949, p. 435). While my focus here will not be on farmers’ agricultural practices as a drive for societal changes but on international migration, I chose Parson’s concept of rurbanization as a label for the incorporation of urban lifestyles in rural areas. The key argumentation is that international migration brought shifts in the working habits, allowing significant accumulation of capital; this gain in financial capital, along with the exposure to western lifestyles lead to rapid and dramatic changes of the rural areas. Migrants are a distinct “status group” whose lifestyles and daily routines have been, at least at the beginning of the village migration history, rather inconsistent with the old rural everyday-living. Migration communities share lifestyles and residential configurations that are more related to host countries and urban living

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<sup>4</sup> In a survey conducted in 2005, 79% of the interviewed migrants stated to have left to work abroad in order to make more money and 45% noted that they wanted a better job (CURS, 2005).

than to the conventional Romanian rural space. Rurban villages are also a proof of the intended temporary character of migration. When first migrants left the country, migration had a circular character and a shorter periodicity imposed by the tight migration legislation (in some cases migrants moved from Romania to destination countries and back every three months, otherwise risking to have the right to travel abroad restricted). Migration related polls conducted starting with early 2000 attested that would-be migrants planned a temporary, not a permanent stay: as an example, in autumn 2002, while plans for temporary migration for work accounted for 17% of the adult population, permanent emigration was considered by 5% (Lăzăroiu, 2003b). These expectations channeled migration gains to home communities, encouraging remittances.

The present study is in line with other research analyzing the impact of the changes following the communist period on labor force migration. The studies by Sandu (2000, 2010), Diminescu and Lăzăroiu (2002), Lăzăroiu (2003) studies regarding Romanian migration and Okólski (2004) or Marokvasic (1999) research concerning Poland provide comprehensive descriptions of the changes that reshaped social mobility and migration in the first decade after the 1989 Revolution. As Okólski shows, the rapid decline of the standards of living and the contraction of the labor market, allowing little occupational opportunities, were especially important when discussing the migration potential in the former communist space. The opening of the borders added to these factors, making it possible for those who lost their financial stability to seek employment abroad. It was “the large masses of the unemployed, the ‘loosely employed’, or ‘rootless people’ who sought to leave the country for economic purposes (Okólski, 2004, p. 50).

### **3. Methodology**

I have conducted a multi-sited ethnographic study (Marcus, 1999) visiting Icușești and then heading to Italy, Turin where most migrant villagers worked. While conducting semi-structured interviews, I have studied migrants whose life history allowed the description of various cases of social mobility in the context of international migration. The field research developed on three different occasions, starting with 2008. I used “ethno-inquiries” to explore the field of my research (Rose, 1982, 1992), trying to use people’s own words and stories when describing their experiences. I did not seek objective truths but contextual meanings. Balancing the situated results of the interviews, research notes have documented the impact of migration on social mobility trajectories and rurban spaces.

Given its multiple causes and its wide ranging consequences, migration is a “total social fact” (Rotariu and Mezei, 1999, p. 5) allowing the understanding of “opportunities and problems, history, present and future of the Romanian society” (Sandu, 2010, p. 35). It is this perspective on migration that

frames the present paper. I describe how rural living has significantly been changed by migration which marked not only the architectural styles and the working habits, but also brought *softer* societal transformation altering social mobility trajectories, daily routines, aspirations and life-choices. The complexity of migration often requires insights from many disciplines. An ethnographic study, such as the one I rely on for this paper, is only one side of the story, especially in lack of a longitudinal and comparative perspective. It is however an accurate glimpse of the “life-worlds” (Schutz, 1982; Schutz and Luckmann [1983], 1989) of migrants, of the way common people understand and live in the social world.

#### 4. Frames of reference for Icușești community study

##### 4.1. Why Icușești?

In 2008 I was trying to find a commune where I could witness the contrasts between the *traditional*<sup>5</sup> rural environment and the changes brought by migration. I wanted to see how the low houses made of „*chirpici*”, –the adobe bricks of clay and straws–, wooden fences and colorful gardens are being gradually replaced by tall brick villas, rising on cemented courtyards closed by iron fences. Following such changes of the financial status plainly displayed by the new buildings, I planned to study paths of social mobility and to see how migration came to be a “life strategy” (Sandu, 2000). I was interested in studying migration flows to Italy given this country’s importance as primary destination for the Romanian labor force starting with early 2000. After a preliminary documentation I chose to conduct the study in Icușești, Neamț county.

Oftentimes had my interlocutors asked how I came to study Icușești out of the hundred other communes in Romania. Why did I stop there for my research? Part of my answer is found in the Communitarian Census of D. Sandu (ATSR 1992-2002)<sup>6</sup>. As per the Census data, Icușești commune had a diverse migration profile, some villages having hardly participated to international mobility (early temporary migration), while others were at the early stages of transnationalism<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Traditional refers to the old rural societies (pre-transition communities) that were much less connected to urban and international spaces.

<sup>6</sup> Communitarian Census (ATSR) classifies rural localities considering 29 variables such as: village cultural type, development level, migration experience, the location of the village in the commune, the location of the village in the region, county development, distance between the village and the closest city, human capital, biological capital, number of buildings, arable land in the area etc. The Census includes 12402 villages and is the result of multilevel statistical analysis in line with Galopentia’s monographic guide, 2002 (web page Dumitru Sandu <http://sites.google.com/site/dumitrusandu/bazededate>).

<sup>7</sup> In this classification, transnational villages are those with a migration prevalence higher than 30%. <http://sites.google.com/site/dumitrusandu/bazededate>.

Icușești and Bălușești<sup>8</sup> were in the latter category (migration prevalence was as high as 35% in the first case and 67% in the latter). Given the differences between villages as regards the migration experience, I expected to witness various instances of the rural transformation sustained by migration and the old ways of a rural community still engaged –although barely– in traditional agricultural work. The commune is located in Moldova, a region with the highest flows to Italy (Lăzăroiu, 2003; Diminescu and Lăzăroiu 2002; Sandu, 2000; Sandu, 2010). Last but not least, it was a random choice of a commune that would fit my research objectives: I had to start somewhere and Icușești seemed to be inviting enough for my research purpose<sup>9</sup>.

#### 4.2. A community profile

Icușești lies on the left bank of the Siret river, in Neamț County. It is 20 km to the closest city, Roman, and 3 to the limits of the neighboring county, Bacău. Two main roads cross the commune D.J. 207 and D.J. 159. It includes seven villages, the largest population being in Bălușești, the youngest village as regards the biological capital<sup>10</sup>. Icușești village is the administrative centre, hosting the city hall and the communal library.

In time, the commune went through various administrative changes extending to nearby villages. Bătrânești, Spiridonești and Rocna were integrated in Icușești in 1880, while Bălușești, a rural locality dating back to 1870, became part of the same commune much later, in 1968. At the time of its incorporation, Bălușești was a commune formed by four villages Bălușești, Mesteacăn, Tabăra and Chilii. Given its past as administrative center, Bălușești is a lot different from the old Icușești villages, not only because it is bigger, but also because it hosts the largest part of the Catholic population in the commune. It is also worth noting that out of the 7.5 km of asphaltic road in the commune in 2009, 5 km were in Bălușești and 2.5 km in Icușești. For a more accurate representation of the migration profile of each village, I have included in Table 1 some data about each of the 7 villages. The table classifies villages considering 3 variables: cultural type, development level and migration rate (ATSR, 2000). According to

<sup>8</sup> If you go to Bălușești, you will see so many villas! Many houses are built there by the Catholic majority. It has been many years since Catholics have first left the country. Many years! [...]. One of the streets there is no different from those in the cities (B, 83, August, 2008)!

<sup>9</sup> Before making the final choice, I discussed with Professor Sandu about two communes: Icușești and Dragomirești. He recommended the former because it had two villages with a migration prevalence higher than 30%.

<sup>10</sup> Icușești: 780 inhabitants, 397 households; Bălușești: 2477 inhabitants, 1017 households; Bătrânești: 207 inhabitants, 97 households; Mesteacăn: 395 inhabitants, 167 households; Rocna: 432 inhabitants, 177 households; Spiridonești: 225 inhabitants, 149 households; Tabăra: 119 inhabitants, 50 households (Source: Distribution according to the documentation prepared by Cozma Elena for the Icușești town hall, 30. 07. 2009).

the community development index (IDC) (Sandu, 2009)<sup>11</sup>, Icușești ranks in the 10% poorest communes in the country, some villages being poorer/ less developed and more isolated than others.

**Table 6.1. Village classification according to the Social Atlas of Romania<sup>12</sup>**

	Cultural type 2002	Development 2002	Migration Prevalence 2002
<b>BALUȘEȘTI</b>	Transition from traditional to modern	Poor <sup>13</sup>	Transationalism
BATRÂNEȘTI	Traditional - isolated	Very poor	Advanced experience
<b>ICUȘEȘTI</b>	Transition from traditional to modern	Poor	Transationalism
MESTEACĂN	Traditional –low education	Very poor	Early experience
ROCNA	Traditional –low education	Very poor	Early experience
SPIRIDONEȘTI	Traditional –low education	Very poor	Advanced experience
TABĂRĂ	Traditional –low education	Very poor	Early experience

*Source:* Atlasul Social al Romaniei ATSRsate (2002), D. Sandu. Data basis

Table 1 shows a clear difference between villages as regards the development stage. These differences are easily visible in the number of new houses and their architectural structure. Bălușești is the fastest growing village.

### 4. 3. A glimpse into the past of Icușești

In the following section I will briefly show how migration came to be an occupational necessity in the commune. Before 1989, the resident population was organized in cooperative associations – collective (“colectiv”) who worked the state owned land. In Bălușești, there was also an animal farm employing some of the local population. After the fall of communism, the farm closed down and the land was reinstated for private use. Generally, it was only the elderly who went on performing agricultural work, usually for household consumption. As villages grew older and farming costs went much higher than gains, land was no longer seen as a viable resource. This change had also been the result of the increasing number of migrants since working abroad has gradually replaced the

<sup>11</sup> ATSR also includes the community development index (IDC), developed by Dumitru Sandu and experts from the National Institute for Statistics. The index is computed based on data from 2007-2008. Theoretical information about the index can be found in Dumitru Sandu, Vergil Voineagu and Filofteia Panduru (2009). *Dezvoltarea comunelor din Romania (Community Development in Romania)*. INS. SAS. (source: <http://sites.google.com/site/dumitrusandu/bazededate>).

<sup>12</sup> Id<sup>11</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a description of the quantitative indicators defining development and modernity please see <http://sites.google.com/site/dumitrusandu/bazededate>.

old work course involving farming. Families with migrant members were also less motivated to work the land as remittances started to be a more reliable income source. Besides, in Catholic families, land property was quite limited given their settlement history in the area –migrant villeins moving from Transilvania to Moldova in the feudal period, owning no land at the time of their arrival– and their family structure, generally larger. The land that they later received from the feudal owner was too little to support successive inheritances, which led to land fragmentation.

Apart from farming and agricultural labor, the active population in the commune had been closely dependent on the employment opportunities in Roman. Before 1989, commuting to work on the industrial sites in the neighboring city was frequent. In Roman, large state companies such as Petrotub (presently ArcelorMittal Steel) could employ several thousand workers. Other mechanical enterprises, a sugar factory and textile manufacturing units were also absorbing much of the labor supply. After 1989, most of the large state companies had to be restructured and the number of job opportunities dropped considerably. Neamț county and others in the North-Eastern part of Romania had an unemployment rate above the national average, the highest picks being registered in the 90s.

Few people in the commune are now working in Roman. As large industrial sites were dismantled, demand for manual labor dropped while service and sales slowly developed, requiring different skills that could no longer be met by community members. There were no programs aimed at the requalification of the recently dismissed laborers. Moreover, it became difficult to travel from certain villages in Icușești to Roman and back. It is long since the old bus having a special route for commuters has been taken out of use. The regular evening bus only stops in the main villages (Icușești and Bălușești). As the distances between villages are as long as 3-4 kilometers, a traveler arriving by bus in the evening must go on foot for several minutes to get to his home. In addition, there is another impediment: manual labor salaries are rather low in Roman, as are those for the employees in the small retail shops. Paying the monthly transport fee would be too expensive for the would-be commuters. In fact, given the high costs for public transport, some of the latest commuters would prefer renting a room in Roman to daily moving back and forth. The weak links with the city were also a reason for many migrants to give up building a house in the commune in favor of buying an apartment in Roman or elsewhere.

Roman was not the only city attracting internal migrants and commuters from Icușești. Various links with other towns had been developed before the fall of communism when workers were detached to large urban enterprises. Many of the ex-internal migrants for labor purpose finally settled in these very towns. The Icușești community thus spread to Bacău and Piatra Neamț but also to further

localities such as Braşov, Sibiu, Târgu-Jiu, Constanţa, Hunedoara, and Bucharest.

In Icuşeşti, international migration has a rather short history as compared to other localities that migrants proudly mention when narrating about the tall houses. As one heads north from Icuşeşti, more new villas with blue and red housetops seem to greet the curious traveler: Ion Creangă, Tămăşeni, Adjudei, all these localities have their own migration story, their versions of social mobility, success or failure. From Icuşeşti people left to various destination countries. In the beginning, people went to Serbia, Turkey, Greece and Germany; soon after, they chose Spain and Italy, the latter now being the most important host country for the commune. Besides, there are also stories about more distant destinations such as Portugal, Ireland and even the United States and Japan. During one of my field trips in the commune, an old lady chatting with a fellow villager replied when seeing my look of wonder when they mentioned „America<sup>14</sup>” among the destination countries: „Poor them, they leave so far away that they barely remember the road back home” (V. 66, August 2009 Icuşeşti).

## **5. Stories about Icuşeşti and its people**

### **5.1. The story of the „Italian neighborhood” in Băluşeşti, the place where one resents being worse off**

Arriving in Băluşeşti, one of the first things that catch your eyes are the remnants of old houses, dirt and bricks- lying in the courtyards of the tall new villas that are now being built. In August, the month when migrants return for the summer leave, people swarm here and there without getting any rest. There is no time to waste and some people barely find the occasion to sit for a chat about Italy; “accomplishments require sacrifices” and “the only breaks one can have are for a meal”, explains one family hurrying back to work after looking at me inquisitively. Every year, the village is increasingly lively during August. Young men return, foreign cars roll on dusty roads, discos are packed, couples get married and the rhythmic sound of the hammer hitting pieces of timber in the new houses spread out through the village. It takes a month to build a one story villa with no finishing details. The latter are planned for next year’s return, in August. It is only when non-migrant relatives can supervise the process that construction work continues all year long with the help of local workers. Otherwise, new villas remain closed and silent for most of the year.

Where most of the new houses built by migrants now stand tall there was once a rich man who owned the land...

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<sup>14</sup> United States.

**Box 1. The Italian/ new neighborhood**

*“The land there was once owned by a rich man, a boyar, and the owner of that company took it [a foreign capital agro-business in Bălușești, note by M.A.]. It might have been the city hall [who took the land; M.A.], I do not quite remember. They took it although they had no documents... It was not their property, was it? The people in the village heard about this; they had no... They were young people who wanted to have their own home and they had everything necessary but for the land so they went there, forcibly took this land and then, when it came to property documents... The police came; there was a conflict: the people against that company or against the city hall. [...] People took the land, piece by piece. They took equal shares; all the pieces were equally big and marked by signs: my land is from here to that point. However, they did not legally own the land. So the owner ordered some tractors to run over the people and plow the land... A lot happened back then, the police came; my mother in law lay on the ground as did many other people. They wanted to run the tractors over the people. It was on TV. [...]” (Ana, 23, Turin, June-July, 2009)”. On the left, a young girl tells how people voluntarily associated to claim the right to use the land that was known to have been owned by a noble man. Reminiscences dating as far as the feudal society are still shaping today’s stories. Since then, the communist collectivization and the changes accompanying industrialization and transition have marked land usage and distribution. Oftentimes, during my conversations in Bălușești I have heard the name “ceangăi” or “unguri” (Hungarian) when people referred to Catholics in Bălușești. The “ceangăi” in Moldova came from Transilvania in mid XVIII century. M.C., the co-author of a forthcoming local monographic study, explained that the catholic families were brought in Bălușești by a Prussian boyar more than 150 years ago to work his land (35 originated in Săbăoani and 5 families came from the Barticești-Botești commune, two Moldovan localities with important Catholic communities) (interview, August 2009). They had little or no land and what they came to possess was insufficient for the large Catholic families. As migration offered the means to buy new land, the old Catholic village extended to a new neighborhood. There are no old houses on the main street crossing the Italian neighborhood and, with the exception of the dusty road, –as the quotation at the beginning states–, one may be dazzled to find the village not very different from a small peripheral city in construction.*

This is the story of the new neighborhood in Balusesti (Icușești). It is included here as told by a young woman living in Turin alongside her husband and child. Many of the migrants who did not buy land in this neighborhood, had to demolish the old parental houses before building new ones. Whether on the new street or rising here or there among older houses, migrants’ houses have distinguishing characteristics making them very different from the past rural households. Going back to my first visit in this commune I remember I immediately noticed the tall houses rising daringly on round pillars made of cement and iron. They were not finished yet. Wide unfinished windows seemed to hide a still inhospitable lodging. The rumor has it that they were built by the mayor’s siblings and that they too have been working abroad to raise the money.

I was not able to find out how much of this story had really happened and what was only an insight of the public beliefs about the birth of the new neighborhood. However, in the end it might not be the truth of a story that matters, or the details lying hidden from most eyes, but perceptions and beliefs, the “*front stage*” of migration. Every August, cars with foreign license plates parked in front of the new houses announce the arrival of their owners. Cars and houses are the plainest indicators of the wealth accumulation allowed by migration.

They do not only provide a better life quality for the migrants themselves but also for other economic actors in the area. Workers in Icușești and from nearby localities such as Ion Creangă are hired for construction jobs all year long, although August is the most prolific month. It is also in August that profits made by shops and discos in the commune are higher than ever and supermarkets in Roman receive frequent shopping visits from migrants who now find it easy to get to the city using their personal cars. Here, as in many other localities with migration experience, migrants’ houses are a symbolic representation of “rurbanization”, an urban life style only remotely linked with the traditional rural everyday living. During the short periods that houses open their doors to welcome their owners, which is during the summer leave and winter holidays, they are the silent witnesses of an urban lifestyle hosted by a rural space.

How many of these houses will keep this routine if the villagers now working abroad definitely return home is yet to be investigated. However, a “rurban” lifestyle probably depends on the occupational opportunities of the returned migrants. For the time being, many remain closed for much of the year, as if they were a summer residence where the owner returns for a short rest after a long year of hard work. There are sites where the only sign of a planned villa is the foundation, sites where unpainted bricks add to form tall walls with unfinished windows, and sites where houses proudly rise to show even some of the slightest finishing details. The interior of such lodgings reveal the same chronology. Rooms are not always entirely furnished. Just by looking at this sequential progression, a visitor could grasp how old is the story of migration in the community and whether host economies have been welcoming for migrants.

### Instances from the old and the new village



1. One of the oldest houses in Bălușești



2. Rural household in Icușești



3. Houses at the entrance in the new village in Bălușești



4. Migrants' house in Bălușești

### 5.2. Occupational mobility abroad and back in emergent rurban villages

A village with migration experience bears many signs of upward social mobility. Less visible than the housing quality, but not of a lesser importance, are the occupational and educational changes. Human capital accumulation may significantly change biographical trajectories. It is this latter case that I will consider in the present section. The story here is about a migrant girl in Bălușești village, Alma. Alma's village hosts a vocational school providing training in textile manufacturing. She studied there, as her mother advised her to. Rather poorly paid (~180 EUR for qualified workers and ~150 EUR for unqualified labor), textile manufacturing is one of the occupational areas that are still dynamic in the neighboring city, Roman. However, Alma was unsatisfied with her educational background, especially since many of her peers managed to get a

high school education. In her case, relative deprivation as regards educational capital seemed to have been an important driver for migration to Italy. Alma succeeded in having an upward professional trajectory in Italy although she had no “weak or strong ties” (Granovetter, 1983) that could support her mobility aspirations<sup>15</sup>. Quite often, labor force migration of Romanians involves deskilling, downward occupational mobility, and unequal transfer of human capital<sup>16</sup> (Alexandru 2011, Alexandru 2012). However, as first migrants waves settle down in destination countries, new comers may find it easier to move up the educational and occupational ladders, especially if they have residential and economic support abroad, as in the case of Alma. In Box 2, I describe Alma’s story of how she gained occupational status during her stay in Italy.

### **Box 2. The story of Alma, the migrant girl with an upward occupational trajectory**

Alma is 20 years old and was born in a family with five children, being the second youngest of her siblings. Three of her siblings work in Italy and have all bought apartments in Roman and Rădăuți (two towns in the northern part of Romania, Moldova region), preferring an urban investment to building a house in the native village. I first met her during the field research in Turin. She noted her family had not been having “significant financial problems” before their leaving abroad but that the most upsetting thing was the impossibility to improve their economic status. The parental household was illustrative for this matter, she said. Nothing changed for years. Her parents were not interested in refurbishing the house and the only improvements were encouraged and paid for by the migrant children. She believed that it was not simply the housing quality that required changes but also the habits of mind, her parents’ wish to have a better life. As she noticed, one needs to have a point of reference to aim for a better quality of life. Italy had been such a benchmark for Alma. She left to Italy in 2006 when she was about 16-17 years old. She started working alongside her sister in a factory producing school supplies. It was an undocumented labor. Two years later she tried to find another job. She knew that her staying in Italy would not be permanent and she feared that if she kept working on the black market she would stand little or no chance to get an employment at the time of her return to Romania.

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<sup>15</sup> Referring to migrants working in Italy, Ambrosini notes, that as useful as migration networks may be for labor market integration, they also restrain upward occupational mobility given their homogeneity as regards occupational distribution (Ambrosini, 2001). This remark is especially true in situations when migration networks build on “strong ties”,

<sup>16</sup> “A survey inquiring about the consistency between the occupation abroad and the professional qualification of migrants show that perceived downward occupational mobility is quite frequent among migrant workers. According IMAS research, 40% of the migrants interviewed in Romania stated that the job abroad was much or somewhat lower than their skills (IMAS, 2011a). The same question addressed to the general public, show that 68% of all Romanians consider that people working abroad have occupations below the achieved level of competencies (IMAS, 2011b). Also, more than half of the interviewed migrants (59%) had neither had a similar job back home nor had they ever tried to find one (69% of those who had never had a similar job in Romania)”(Alexandru, 2011).

During our conversation, she recurrently talked about her educational plans. The quotation below shows her regret that Romanians in Italy still worked on the black market and illustrates her plans to improve her education.

*Afterwards I started to look for information about a school I could go to while being here [Turin] because I am totally against... So I think that the people working here for old ladies and men, for... People like my sister, who works on the black market without demanding her rights. I am against all this. Maybe people who are older than I am... Maybe they need to... They have to work on the black market, they have to save money and build a house in Romania. But I am not married; I have no family, no responsibilities. So, when I started studying here I thought: well, if I could not study in Romania, at least I get the chance to do it here, which I must do because I cannot go on working for this factory without papers. After 10 years... Not 10 years; it seems too long. In 4 or 5 years, when things go wrong in Italy, I will return to Romania and what will I have accomplished? No school in Romania, nothing here either (Alma, 20, Torino, June-July, 2009).*

In Italy, Alma also studied to become a „parruchiera” (hairdresser). She found a course organized by the local municipality (200 hours-long training free of charge), paid some extra hours to improve her skills and got a job in a beauty salon. She also started an informal business as a hairdresser for Romanian friends and relatives in Turin. Shortly after our conversation in Turin, I met her again in Bălușești where she returned for her August leave. She was still cutting and styling hair for her fellow villagers and family. Nevertheless, the hairstyles she learned in Italy were not always welcomed in her home community. As she narrated, she once gave a 20 year young man a modern haircut. She cut his hair into unequal lengths but it was neither “unusual” nor “vulgar”. Next day she noticed he had shaved all his hair. He said „My mother asked me to cut my hair”.

Alma’s example is noteworthy for the possible changes in the social mobility trajectories of the new migrant-waves as compared with the older ones. Future studies might assess such changes and the main drivers for upward social mobility of migrants in a quantitative framework. As for the changes in the home community when migrants overcome the barriers of the black market and manage to get better jobs than the regular 3D’s<sup>17</sup>, it is worth noting that Alma gained prestige by standing out from most of the women migrants who regularly work in care and cleaning services. However, as she brought different hairdressing styles in her home community, her influence and recognition were somewhat hindered by local habits. Although her skills were acknowledged by community members who used to contact her when they needed to have their hair cut and dressed, it was only the younger fellow villagers who seemed to overtly welcome Italian hairstyles. Moreover, demand for hairdressing services is low in rural communities, except for some pick periods when migrants return for the short holiday stay. As Alma herself noted, if she should return, there

<sup>17</sup> 3D jobs „dangerous, demanding/ difficult, dirty” (Skeldon, 1997, p. 75, Stalker, 2001, p. 23).

would be little chances for her to work as a hairdresser in the commune and she would probably have to look for opportunities in neighboring cities. Although emergent rurban villages came close to urban spaces as regards many residential, consumption or working habits, some other urban routines, such as the demand for beauty treatments, might take more time to be adopted.

## **6. Conclusions and thoughts from my research journal**

In this paper I explored some of the changes associated to migration, social mobility and rurban spaces. By using some stories of community or individual development I showed how migration changes social mobility trajectories and shapes “rurban” villages, defined here as socio-geographic spaces where standards of living and lifestyles resemble more to host countries and to urban localities in Romania than to the traditional rural spaces.

In one of these rurban spaces, Icușești commune, I saw:

- a mix of colors shaping the local landscape: the old traditional houses with light green or sky blue walls and fences on the one hand, and the new tall villas with red or dark blue rooftops on the other;

- new and old ways of life together when I talked to an old lady wearing dark conservative clothes and a stainless steel watch bracelet;

- an old man riding a noisy scooter and a Dacia 1310 overloaded with watermelons on top of which three young men were yelling „watermelon” to let people know the fruits were for sale. This “watermelon Dacia” was rolling on the same streets as foreign cars with Italian registration plates;

- a migrant’s wedding in an old wooden orthodox church in Icușești and the following party 43 km further in a nearby castle, Miclăușeni.

I have seen all these and I called this locality a place of contrasts because –I thought- there was no gradual process of passing from old to new ways of life, from traditional to modern, from conservative to liberal. Was I right to label it this way? It might be that I had actually witnessed an ordinary transformation in a context where change does not come at a steady pace. This is because in August migrants have to live for a whole year in only one month. They build in August, get married in August and it is in August when they finally have a rest after one year of hard work. Contrasts might actually be represented by the mutual existence of two ways of life that are rapidly evolving to create a rurban space. Whether the old rural ways will eventually wither away as generations change, is yet to be evaluated.

Seeing all this, I wondered what one of the eldest ladies in the village – living in a low traditional cottage and knowing the old ways of the village – thought of the youths who now dress in stylish Italian clothes, of the modern haircuts, and the tall houses, of a way of life that turned its back to land, cattle and farming in favor of jobs that are thousands of kilometers away. I then realized that it was me who perceived the old world as being at odds with the

one today. This elderly lady slowly led me through the room with old chests and garments to the picture of a nephew. This nephew lived, worked and eventually died in a foreign country during a recent car accident. He was her last relative... I then realized that migration was part of life, from beginning to end and that it could not be seen as something foreign to its nature as the idea of *foreign* country would suggest. Migration was part of everybody's life; it was here and now; there was something new even in the old ways and something old in the new ways. Migration had not only marked the surrounding space but also the flow of time.

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