Comparative Migration Studies

ORIGINAL ARTICLE Open Access

"When they return home they do nothing for half a year": opposing remittances and articulations of Romanian migrant labour in agriculture

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Abstract

Food security is becoming increasingly problematised, as demonstrated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown, or by the crisis in the global grain markets induced by the war in Ukraine. How out-migration and return change agriculture in different countries of origin, including Eastern Europe, is less understood in connection to such crises. In this paper we look at the ways in which agriculture and its labour regime change under the impact of international migration in two geographical areas in Romania, the Transylvanian Highlands and Banat. We analyse how two types of actors return to Romanian agriculture and how they occupy different labour positions: small-scale entrepreneurs and seasonal workers. Unlike much research on migration and development depicting migrants as agents of positive change, we consider social remittances as contested. We advance the notion of "opposing remittances" to account for how migrants differently reflect on their migration experiences and how class-based relations, marginalisation and racial inequalities affect social remittances related to labour. Ultimately, this paper reveals how inequalities are entangled in return migration in agriculture, and how contingent migration experiences contribute to the variegation of social remittances.

Keywords Social remittances, Labour, Social inequality, Return migration, Agriculture, Romania

Introduction

"Their pride is to go to Spain or Germany to work at asparagus and then come back with a lot of money in their pocket. When they return home they do nothing for half a year then they go again", recalled Eugen, a young Romanian-German returnee now living with his family in a Transylvanian village. The sentence regarded his co-villagers, Roma seasonal workers who preferred working in West European farms instead of remaining to work in Romania and has obvious derogatory overtones. Migration researchers often hear such negative stories of Eastern European migrant labour. Complaints regarding

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migrants' labour ethics are frequent among local entrepreneurs in Romania and are linked to labour shortages in agriculture. Such narratives invite us to examine critically assumptions and expectations regarding migrants' labour. We do so by putting labour in the frame of social remittances and then by projecting this understanding back onto the articulations of migrants' labour experiences abroad and at home. We discuss the condition of returnees involved in food production in their country of origin, showing how inequalities and social remittances shape class and labour relations, with a focus on return migration in Romanian agriculture.

Migration, including in Romania, is often praised for its capacity to bring prosperity and progress in the country. This optimism of remittances rests on their pivotal role in economic growth and on their capacity to generate positive social change (Hagan & Wassink, 2020; Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2017). Acknowledging the importance of remittances in the politics of development, we question their sometimes simplistic understanding as inherently positive, cumulative, and operating in synergy towards economic growth and social progress. Consequently, we focus on the contradictions involved, on their connections with class and specifically on the tensions between social remittances and labour relations. In particular, we examine how Romanian migrants engage in the transformation of labour relations in agriculture and how these contradictions are incorporated in the political economy of food production. The paper builds on the agency of rural inhabitants, looking at how their ideas (here social remittances related to agriculture labour) are moulded by various migration experiences and belonging to different classes and ethnic groups. We analyse returnees with larger assets, usually employing locals, and economically deprived returnees, mostly Roma, with no land assets and little knowledge of how to run companies and investment projects. Unequal labour relations investigated in this paper are not only part of the European geography of migration, but also of the global landscape of labour mobility and, more significantly, of the global food regime incorporating entrenched inequalities at various scales (Findlay & McCollum, 2013).

Social remittances, intangibility and inequality

According to the now-standard literature pioneered by Peggy Levitt, social remittances are central to understanding the changes produced by migration in areas of origin. Initially the concept was built to distinguish migrants' social from financial remittances (Levitt, 2001), proposing an approach to understand some of the effects of migration alternative to the dominant focus on financial remittances. In this context the interaction and exchanges between migrants and their communities of origin are paramount in order to grasp how the flows of ideas, tastes, objects and values that migrants carry with them between countries are often reflected in new ways of acting socially. Studies on social remittances regard migrants as agents of social and cultural change (Vargas-Silva, 2013), remitting not just money, but more importantly normative structures, systems of practice, identities and social capital (Levitt, 2001). These categories expanded to include behavioural changes such as fertility, consumption, beliefs, expectations, worldviews and ideas, ideologies and values, political or cultural remittances (Vargas-Silva, 2013; Grabowska et al., 2017). Its wide use and its multi-dimensionality made social remittance a catch-all concept to account for all types of migrant transfers except the financial ones. Due to this conceptual expansion covering diverse categories and phenomena,

some authors pointed towards ambiguities and conceptual gaps (Boccagni & Decimo, 2013; Nowicka & Šerbedžija, 2016), with some scholars also highlighting the need for systematisation and classification, and for contextualisation of social remittances within broader societal changes (White, 2021; White & Grabowska, 2019).

Studies also discuss the intangibility and tangibility of social remittances (Nowicka & Šerbedžija, 2016; Pinkow-Läpple & Möllers, 2022), the latter referring for instance to elements of material culture related to migration (such as objects or pieces of art). The notion of intangible remittances opens up an avenue of theorising the tensions between the intangibility of social remittances and their material and non-material implications in processes of diffusion. The focus on migrant labour as social remittance in this study will combine sensitivity to intangible elements attached to labour (such as ideas, attitudes and values towards labour, or understandings of labour) and attention to the more tangible social and structural conditions affecting it. Aware of its analytical imprecision, in this paper we therefore preserve the more conventional term 'social remittances' as it allows us to better grasp the interplay between migrants' agency and social structures, and especially the *contrasts* between different deployments of remittances in agricultural labour. Concomitantly, focusing on class and labour relations, we try to bring back uneven development, peripheralization and inequality in the conversations about social remittances.

Social remittances are usually associated with an implicit normativity beyond economic development, as they are thought to emulate modernisation and social progress (Garapich, 2016). This is explicit in studies on return and development (Hagan & Wassink, 2020) discussing human capital improvement by out-migration and return migration – examples include the gain of new entrepreneurial skills, ideas and knowledge from abroad such as Philippine migrants planting palm trees upon their return from Malaysia (Montefrio et al., 2014), Bangladeshi returnees from Japan applying new management techniques in local plants (Higuchi & Nanako, 2011) or East Europeans bringing new farming ideas and practices (Anghel et al., 2025). In this context social remittances were praised in many government programs aiming to attract highly qualified returnees whose qualifications could bring positive results for their home countries (Jonkers, 2008).

Other domains of life are also relevant as *loci* of social remittances diffusion, such as families or local communities (Grabowska & Garapich, 2016; Fauser & Anghel, 2019; White, 2021). As White and Grabowska indicate, "ideas about gender equality seem to travel surprisingly well" (2019, p. 38). In this sense, several studies show how family and gender norms may change under the influence of social remittances, with women tending to emancipate from unequal relations within their families and communities (King & Lulle, 2022; Pinkow-Läpple, 2023). Some new ideas or values are positively regarded by non-migrants, such as a new understanding of consumption and growing individualisation and autonomy; in this way, non-migrants emulate migrants' behaviour and consumption patterns (White, 2021). Migrants may also change local established practices for new common projects (Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2017) sometimes infusing norms related to civil society involvement, social trust and human rights (Piper, 2008).

On the other hand, the optimism of remittances triggered important critiques (Glick-Schiller, 2009). As this paper also indicates, social remittances are entangled within class and inequality at multiple scales. We resonate with research on the interconnections

between structural economic inequality and migration in Europe (Nölke & Vliegenthart, 2009) and on processes which produce and reproduce migrants as 'assets' (Glick Schiller 2009) in the global economy. Sceptical positions on social remittances are also present in the critical analyses of neoliberalism (Moody, 2018). More broadly, social remittances tend to reflect global asymmetries and structures of inequality between countries of origin and destination (White, 2021) that underpin remittances' diffusion from more developed to less developed societies. There is even resistance to social remittances (Garapich, 2016) when migrants are stigmatised on moral grounds, being accused of corrupting communities or of abandoning their moral duties towards their children and families (White, 2021, p. 3192). As well, social remittances and migrants' projects for helping communities of origin may generate tensions or frustrations when their projects do not match the needs of non-migrants (Lindley, 2013). Some of these tensions between migrants and stayers express similarly wider global hierarchies and are connected to inequalities within transnational social spaces based on status, class, ethnicity or gender (Boccagni & Decimo, 2013). They may generate resistance on behalf of non-migrants reacting to social remittances brought by migrants (Grabowska et al., 2017).

In this paper we expand this critical agenda not by scrutinising inequalities among migrants and stayers, but among migrants themselves. We advance the notion of *opposing remittances* to underline the contested and contextualised nature of social remitting. We acknowledge differences between migrants (Levitt, 2001) and argue that selectivity and transfer of social remittances vary according to migration experiences, class, racial/ethnic, age or gender inequalities among returnees. We thus examine how class and ethnic inequalities shape the ways in which migrants reflect, transform and diffuse social remittances, sometimes generating contradicting aspirations, views and tensions. With this occasion we also reflect on the intangibility of social remittances as we analyse different meanings associated with agricultural labour and scrutinise the tangible and intangible consequences of these remittances. Our notion of opposing remittances treats the diffusion of social remittances as a selective process of imitation and contextual embeddedness (Grabowska et al., 2017). We contextualise ensuing tensions by examining how migrants returning to Romanian agriculture occupy two different positions in agricultural labour relations: entrepreneurs and seasonal workers. Then we examine how they articulate differently the meaning of labour "at home" and "abroad" and how these are translated locally, engaging class relations and producing a tension in Romanian agricultural labour relations.

The case study and research methodology

While analysing labour relations in connection to social remittances, we select from the rich literature on labour ideas about self-realisation, as theorised by Marxian thinkers, including Adorno (1968) in his critique of industrial work, and about labour as commodity shaped by class relations. Past debates revolved around the usefulness of class against other concurrent concepts such as status or groups (Weeden & Grusky, 2005). As class reassessed its centrality in social sciences and it is widely used in the critique of neoliberalism and analyses of economic inequality (Kalb, 2015), labour holds its fundamental role in structuring class and economic relations (Tonkiss, 2006). Building on this framework, our case study brings more sensitivity to social inequalities between returned migrants. Moreover, it supports a critical understanding of labour relations, revealing

Table 1 Characteristics of the interviewee sample

	men/ women	men/ women	men/ women	men/ women	men/ women	Total
Age group	20's	30's	40's	50's	60's and more	36
Migrant seasonal workers	2/1	3/2	3/1	1/0		13
Returnee entrepreneurs in agriculture	0/1	1/0	2/1	1/0		6
Non-migrant entrepreneurs in agriculture		1/1	1/2	1/1	0/1	8
Returnee entrepreneurs in food production and connected domains	1/0	2/0	1/1			5
Migrants in Romania		1/1	1/0		1/0	4

how seasonal migrant workers and returnee entrepreneurs use social remittances differently to articulate contrasting representations of labour and develop opposed interest positions in Romanian agriculture.

We carried out fieldwork in 2021 and 2022 in the regions of Transylvanian Highlands[1] and Banat, respectively in Central and Western Romania. We conducted another round of fieldwork in the summer of 2023, gathering new insights while discussing with some of the persons we have interviewed earlier. We have chosen these regions to capture various experiences of agricultural labour - the Banat region is mostly on plains with fertile land and many producers centre their selling activities in Timișoara, a large Romanian city. Transylvanian Highlands is a hilly region with forests, fields and meadows, having a more diversified local agriculture and we carried out fieldwork in regions closer to smaller cities. We conducted qualitative fieldwork and interviewed 36 persons with various migration experiences: migrant seasonal workers (13–4 women and 9 men), entrepreneurs in agriculture – returnees (6–2 women and 4 men), and non-migrants (8–5 women and 3 men) and returnee entrepreneurs in food production and related domains (5–1 woman and 4 men). We also interviewed international immigrants: 3 entrepreneurs and 1 involved in volunteering related to agriculture and land use (1 woman and 3 men, from France (2), Germany and the UK). Two of them worked in food production before migration and opened up 1 small and 1 medium scale companies. Interviews with migrant seasonal workers were carried out in Transylvanian Highlands and the majority were poor Roma (8 out of 13); during the fieldwork we were not able to find Roma entrepreneurs. It is also important to mention that in the localities where we did fieldwork in Transylvania, the Roma we have interviewed are economically marginalised, live segregated and have low education. Seasonal workers who were not Roma worked as seasonal workers at a certain point in time and could change jobs upon return. Among returned entrepreneurs, some worked in agriculture before (3–2 women and 1 man), while the rest had different other jobs in construction, hospitality industry, business and engineering, some working as well as company administrators. They entered agriculture and related domains upon return. At the time of the interview, the age of interviewees varied: 5 were in their 20s, 12 in their 30s, 13 in their 40s, 4 in their 50s and two in their 60s or more. In the Table 1 below we provide the structure of the sample.

The selection criterion of migration experience was based on individuals who resided outside the country for more than 6 months. We have considered returnees those individuals who have returned for more than 6 months, but also those in circular

[1] During the fieldwork we were aided by Irina Zamfirescu in conducting interviews in one research location in Transylvania.

migration who spend variable time in the country. While seasonal migrants and most of the returnees had a rural background, there were also urbanites among the entrepreneurs who started a business in agriculture. The education and background varied widely within these heterogeneous groups of people; those more educated tended to be entrepreneurs while seasonal migrants tended to have less education. We have thus used theoretical sampling (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) covering these diverse profiles and capturing perspectives of migrants and stayers, entrepreneurs and migrant seasonal workers, Roma and non-Roma, younger and older. We selected interviewees by using a number of key informants in the region, followed by snowballing technique. Interviews were semi-structured and usually lasted between one hour and two hours. In some cases interviews were shorter. Multiple informal conversations improved our understanding of local labour relations. A thematic analysis was applied to the empirical material. Topics included migration motivations and migration experiences with a focus on labour and how the labour environment is transformed by migration; relations with employers and work colleagues, as well as acquisition of social remittances. We have also inquired about their transnational practices and reasons for returning to Romania. In a third section topics included life projects, opportunities and hindrances, uses of remittances and labour relations with employers and employees (for entrepreneurs), if and how they maintained transnational relations upon return. In addition, interviewees were asked to assess their social relations at home and abroad, comment on their general situation and jobs in both contexts. By selecting these topics we tried to capture returnees' perspectives on labour in agriculture, at the same time allowing variation and new topics to emerge from interviews. As we have conducted the research in a limited number of localities the pool of entrepreneurs was inevitably limited; similarly, information gathered from seasonal migrants in a selected number of villages was repetitive of certain issues, as they usually had similar migration trajectories. Focusing mainly on these localities also allowed us to triangulate sensitive information with information from other interviews and by having informal conversations with locals, acquaintances or friends of migrants.

Agriculture is a main occupation in many rural areas of southern Transylvania and our interactions with the locals revolved inevitably around subjects related to food production, labour and agriculture. Thus, besides the formal quota of interviews we have also employed participant observation, inquiring into the attitudes of entrepreneurs and migrants vis-à-vis other migrants and locals, chatting on various local subjects, observing daily interactions, and tuning in to local gossip. Such information provided context for the information we have obtained through interviews. Rural fieldwork in the Transylvanian Highlands also proved fruitful for unpacking social remittances on the local level as much of the research was not carried out in rural but in urban settings, with urban areas being expected to receive more innovations and social remittance diffusion (White, 2019). During the research we encountered a variety of situations, including cases of abuse and exploitation. As some information was sensitive, we preserve the anonymity of interviewees and contexts. All names are therefore anonymised and pseudonyms are used in the paper. Research goals and dissemination of results were also presented to participants. Prior to recording interviews, we obtained oral informed consent from all participants and paid attention to sensitive information.

Romania in the landscape of Europe's regime of food production

The migration-agriculture nexus in the EU points to the dependency of agri-food business on supplies of cheap and flexible labour, mainly from Eastern Europe and Africa. King, Lulle and Melossi (2021) mention the "geographical concentration and intensification in areas of specialised monocrop production" – Romanian migrants are indeed employed in intensive agriculture, but on the other hand they also work in smaller farms, in agro-pastoral activities. The neoliberalisation of agriculture generates low-waged labour, a process in which "the vulnerability of migrant farmworkers has been actively engineered" by global agri-food actors (Milbourne & Coulson, 2021). Although cases differ and there is local specificity, it should be noted that the precariousness of agricultural workers is systemic and leads to "structural disempowerment" (Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010), an enduring dimension of European agriculture. Therefore, the precariousness of migrant agricultural work from Eastern Europe agriculture may translate into "little prospects of eventually graduating as farmers, entrepreneurs, citizens" (Nori & Farinella, 2020).

Eastern European economies – including the combined effects of de-industrialisation, de-urbanisation and economic restructuring –created conditions for the emergence of a large population of precarious workers made available to the EU's agri-food sector. In this respect, the condition of Romania's peasantry largely explains its position as a labour supplier in the global food regime in Europe. Romania's rural world is a special case in the EU: 53.1% of the population lived in predominantly rural regions, in 2020, there were 3,422,030 agricultural holdings in the country (of which 91.8% were of less than 5 hectares, and more than 2 million were less than 1 hectare) and 18.5% represented the percentage of agriculture in total employment (European Commission, 2020). Approximately 66% of the EU's small farms (less than 5 hectares) are located in Romania. Another component in the integration of Romanian agriculture in the global food regime is the development of farms over 50 ha and larger, which although representing only about 0.9% of the existing farms, concentrate over 54% of the utilised agricultural land (European Commission, 2022).

The result of these processes is an "extremely polarised agricultural structure" (Feher et al., 2017, p. 675) between very small and very large farm holdings. Of all EU countries, Romania has the largest share of population living in rural areas, the largest share of population employed in agriculture and among the highest urban/rural and regional disparities. Coupled with low income, low levels of human development, and social marginalisation, this economic structure in Romania's rural areas generates a large pool of potential migrants in agriculture. Migration affects their rural world and raises significant problems pertaining to the condition of peasantry in the European peripheries.

Romanian seasonal workers and transnational articulations of labour

Returnees articulate their labour in relation to their experiences and understandings of mobility and their future plans. Our interviewees, both seasonal workers and entrepreneurs, constantly compared conditions in Romania and Western Europe, reflecting on positive and negative experiences of out-migration and return. In the past ten years, seasonal work in agriculture from the villages we have conducted research in Transylvanian Highlands was directed mostly towards Germany. The seasonal workers we had interviewed, mostly Roma, had no prior qualifications besides their experience in agricultural

work and being accustomed to hard physical labour. They had precarious employment at home, working temporarily in local agriculture, construction, or taking up work assignments offered by their richer non-Roma neighbours. An entire migration industry towards German agriculture developed, centred on manpower companies channelling abroad the labour of the poor (Cosma et al., 2020). There appeared local recruiters in neighbouring towns, websites advertising labour offers, and posters in central places of villages. Sometimes this seasonal work migration was built on prior migration networks abroad. These developments are also in line with the neoliberalisation of West European agriculture mentioned above, which brought about a surge of seasonal labourers from the region (Anghel et al., 2025).

Returnees' articulations of labour are ambivalent and are intermingled with their return and out-migration experiences. Their migration stories revealed representations of labour which translate into variegated intangible social remittances. Their assessment of labour conditions "abroad" derives from very tangible labour conditions they encountered. The sequel is more nuanced in comparison with the bleak picture produced by the literature which stresses various forms of labour exploitation (Palumbo et al., 2022) and the emergence of "just-in-time" agricultural labourers (Garrapa, 2016). On the negative side, migrants recalled how difficult and poorly paid was their work, and how vulnerable their positions were. For Oana, labour was physically hard – "trees were small there, you had to bend to the ground for picking". From her and other migrants' perspective, labour was insufficiently regulated, as they recalled overworking, seven days a week and more than eight hours a day. The bodily experience of these workers was particularly affected by weather. The impact of hard agricultural work and precarious labour conditions on the migrants' bodies is widely documented in various geographical contexts and raises serious moral concerns in the EU and globally (Holmes, 2013). Oana remembered the hardships of working in the rain or snow, while Costel, another seasonal worker, contrasted the labour during sunny or rainy days:

> *It was nice to pick in the orchard for three weeks when the weather was nice and sunny. But when it was raining, you would feel the water everywhere. Once my cape broke and water poured on my entire body. To my luck, one manager gave me a replacement cape.*

Such assessments of physical difficulty were reported by both men and women, Roma or non-Roma. Yet labour difficulty varied as involved outdoor or indoor activities, vegetable plantations and orchards, or animal farms work, with the most demanding jobs being on outdoor plantations in adverse weather conditions. Interviewees reported that most Roma worked in physically-demanding jobs, yet sometimes they were able to obtain more rewarding positions in animal farms.

Another reported difficulty arose from mechanisation. Workers had to keep up with machines where they had to put the fruits: "The machine moves and even when it moves slowly, it still moves and you have to keep up with it" (Oana). Costel also assessed how industrialisation and rhythmicity of labour in industrial agriculture pressures labourers' bodies: "if you are a woman you lay on your belly and breasts, you had to pick cucumbers many hours and stay close to the ground, you inhale the toxins they pour in the ground". Therefore, many seasonal workers consider this type of agricultural labour as "the most difficult" and their condition especially vulnerable, as they could be treated

arbitrarily and enjoyed too little protection, including in cases when they got sick and are "sent back" to Romania so as to not generate extra cost to farmers. The debates on intensification of labour indicate the exploitative character of industrialised agriculture (King et al. 2021). We have discovered similar situations in our returnees' stories: "You were like a machine there, your hands were cutting the whole time, and salads were flying, I could not feel my hands anymore" (Sorin). Admittedly, for some other migrants, mechanisation was regarded positively: "they brought machines so that people are no longer forced to work that much. Machines greatly help [farmers] to cope with the work. Where I was, the picking of cherries for instance, was done by machines" (Oana). Vlad had also a nuanced view on mechanisation and labour organisation being tight but rational. He recalled his working days – six hours hard work in the morning, lunch and rest afterwards, followed by a second slot of intense working hours with other tasks. He also recalled that labour was carefully planned and rational.

> *We worked humanly, not to break our backs. They said we would need three weeks for the work, in three weeks we have finished it. They have trusted us and they didn't check on us of what we were doing. At the departure they hugged us and said that next time accommodation will be free.*

And yet, despite hard working conditions abroad, often interviewees made favourable comparisons with the work regime in Romanian agriculture. All seasonal migrants claim decent labour conditions "at home" and fair treatment, similar to what they have encountered abroad, arguing that labour in Romania was much harder, worse paid and more discriminatory than abroad. Fairer treatment was particularly important for the Roma. Ion, one seasonal migrant, worked many years in the village in forestry, agriculture and had also other temporary jobs. As he stated, "in Romania you work only to survive, not to get ahead". Similar opinions were expressed also by Alexandru, another Roma seasonal migrant who remembered he was working very much in Romania, sometimes much more than in Germany, often receiving mainly food for his labour. Reflecting on the situation of the poor Roma seasonal migrants we encountered, everyday racism and derogatory attitudes add a layer of difficulty. This is consonant with the general condition of Roma, as they are exposed to marginalization and antigypsyism throughout Europe (van Baar, 2011). As Ioana, a Romanian, argued, "the Roma are badly treated as they are Roma, no matter how much they would work". At home, these Roma seasonal migrants seek not only better payments, but also better treatment and respect. Despite widespread antigypsyism in Europe, when comparing labour in Romania and abroad, Alexandru, another Roma seasonal worker stated:

> *[In Romania] you are kicked out in two weeks if they don't like something. But [in Germany] I am respected, and everybody is respected; this is something I care about and I am keen to work for these people… If I need a loan, the German farmer gives me one. And if he needs to, I can work the whole day, until at 10 o'clock in the night, even more.*

Labour experiences abroad thus varied (Anghel et al., 2025; Fratsea & Papadopoulos, 2021) and not all accounts were particularly negative. In many cases, Western farms were considered beautiful and well organised, while farmers were "good people" (Ionel). "The farm was so beautiful and so nicely organised", recalled Oana, who remembered

her labour abroad as a sort of lifestyle experience: "I felt like on vacation; I lived in a caravan and I liked it very much. I have really enjoyed working there… and I have met other people". Besides, most returnees reported that they were correctly treated: "we were correctly paid. You had to work and you were told what to do" (Oana). Raluca worked at a fruit cooperative in France and she describes labour conditions there as "heaven on earth" in comparison to Romania. She was particularly impressed by how lunch breaks were strictly respected: "they would stop us one hour to have lunch and then we continued until 5 o'clock" (Raluca). She also gave positive accounts of accommodation at the cooperative: "we had a super low rent, in more than decent conditions, we shared the house, but with separate entrances, kitchens, bathrooms, we had a nice little house in the middle of the orchard". Such assessments that we have captured during interviews were also expressed by migrants interacting with their co-villagers, gossiping or chatting on various topics. As agricultural labour is central to many peoples' lives, daily talks usually revolve around Western agriculture and how it was perceived by migrants. Thus, while labour abroad was in general perceived as being difficult, migrants, especially the Roma men and women, also reported good experiences and fair treatment from the side of Western farmers. Again, this was put in contrast with labour conditions in Romania, considered more exploitative and less paid. Noting these differences in the representation of labour abroad by migrants themselves, let us now shift our attention towards entrepreneurs.

Returnee entrepreneurs and their farming initiatives

Different from seasonal migrants, returned entrepreneurs in agriculture had distinct migration experiences. Few worked in agriculture abroad many years ago; many others had different jobs in construction, transportation, hospitality, or commerce. Most of them had long-term migration experience and at some point in time they were able to acquire land either inheriting it or purchasing it using remittances when it was very cheap. The distinction between industrial, entrepreneurial and peasant farming is useful (Van der Ploeg, 2018) as it helps us frame the scale and the modus operandi of these farms, with industrial farming following more closely industrial farming in Western Europe. Return migration might bring positive social change, but also plays a significant role in the reproduction and adaptation of capitalist relations in the European semi-peripheries. We talked to entrepreneurs who practise small-scale farming or are self-employed, only three having medium-size industrial farms. In order to capture their experiences, we delineate cases of returnees with labour experiences in the Western agriculture, where occupational channelling (Hagan & Wassing, 2020) occurs and social remittances related to professionalization are more tangible.

In line with the international literature, studies on returned entrepreneurs conducted in Romania unpack returnees' initiatives and innovations, distinguishing between opportunity and necessity-driven entrepreneurs and factors that motivated their return (Croitoru, 2020). In the first example, Luminița's husband was administering a farm in Spain and she was also working there. After 10 years of stay abroad they returned to Romania. She and her husband used their own funds and applied for EU funds for agriculture in Romania to start and develop their farm. They were able to open a blueberry farm where they used irrigation systems similar to what they had seen abroad and utilised them with pipes and accessories imported from abroad.

As their farms are medium and small scale, entrepreneurial farmers have to develop multiple skills and to compete on multiple fronts with large, industrial farms (Van der Ploeg, 2018). This was visible in the case of Adrian who had worked in an organic farm in Germany for many years. After the inheritance of a large plot of land he returned to run the same type of business at home. Adrian considers he learned how to farm properly in Germany. He remembered how he worked and how he acquired the knowledge needed to manage a professional farm: "you have to know how and when to plough, sow, to keep the machines running … everything I know is from Germany". He emphasised the knowledge one has to possess in order to be profitable, to plan investments, quantities of fertilisers, types of crops and agricultural works. "You have to invest. If you have milk cows you need a robot and you have to deal with it personally. If you don't do everything by yourself, you cannot go ahead, [you fail]" (Adrian). He stresses the multiple skills one needs to possess: of a mechanic in case machines urgently need repairing, of controlling costs, to ensure access to water and pay attention to minimising losses by saving any leftovers, including hay.

Entrepreneurs who worked in Western agriculture regard mechanisation and labour intensification as instrumental for farms' profitability. This was different from seasonal workers, who discussed intensification in relation to job difficulty and bodily experiences. As an entrepreneur, Raluca considers that in agriculture there is no time to hang about or chat and that time should be effectively measured, arguing that farms should be profitable. Radu, a farmer without migration experience stresses the same, and he adds that professional farmers need to have a special endowment of passion for land, plants and animals, explaining the aesthetics of flower gardens in the West and the beauty of farms as a result of long-term affection and involvement. In line with these attitudes, Gabriel, a migrant farmer from Western Europe settled in the region, synthesised this entrepreneurs' attitude. He claimed that "[here in Romania] there is much potential but people are uneducated. There was unproductive agriculture and workers were not regularly paid. And you have to know how to farm and what to do… agriculture is a way of life, this is how it is in France". A similar attitude was also expressed by Adrian whom we quoted before: "I noticed in all villages, farmers don't know how to do agriculture, they don't know how to work. And there are also some Mafioso [people], they get [European] subsidies, they don't even know how to use them properly, and they also mistreat people; now they are going down". Significantly, in contrast to local farmers, returnees claim they run their businesses more professionally.

At the same time, entrepreneurs complained about adverse local conditions, such as veterinary rules, access to water and the lack of sewage systems. "You need to clean stables and you need water and a sewage system, yet there is no sewage system in the village and in the drought that we now experience there is also no water" (Adrian). Stating the level of farms' development, they consider there is no comparable level of mechanisation as in Western agriculture, one of the reasons being also the lack of a capable workforce able to run these larger and costly machines. As Oana says, "in Romania one could not see machines as in the West, to pick apples with no human control, only on the TV you see that". These returnees claim that, in contrast to non-migrant farmers, they observe quality control of production more closely and focus more on farms' profitability, being also more innovative, eager to utilise new ideas and tapping into new consumer markets. They also praise themselves for trying new types of crops and products,

including opening new businesses in ecological food or slow food chains, setting up blueberry farms in mountain regions, small food factories, including beverages, jams or cheese. While some returned entrepreneurs built their understanding of agricultural work abroad around a notion of knowledge acquisition, personal worth, labour specialisation and profit, others focus instead on the local labour market conditions, constraints and their involvement on the local level in Romania.

Notably, entrepreneurs regarded the physical difficulty of agricultural work as a given, lacking a differentiated understanding of how this difficulty varied across activities. No particular concern regarding the bodily experiences of seasonal or day workers was expressed, and there was little empathy towards manual workers. Quite often they reproduce negative and depreciative stereotypes about seasonal and day workers and their agricultural work in Germany, accusing them of being unreliable and guided only by short-term thinking. This was particularly visible when they discussed the Roma. In Adrians' words, seasonal migrants are not interested in agriculture; only in partying, drinking and hanging around. Similar views are expressed by other entrepreneurs who regret the disappearance of local agricultural practices. Andreas, a well-off returnee, had the intention to offer cows to locals in his village of origin, yet the locals replied they no longer need cattle to keep:

> *… they go, stay 3–4 months, get some money, return, spend it all and migrate again. They work like stupid 14–16 h/day. For instance the lady keeping the pension house went to work abroad; she had a garden before now she has nothing arguing that labour does not pay off.*

There were certain variations in the views on seasonal migrants. Ionel, one returnee from Italy, was working his blueberry fields with a couple of Roma families. Dana, his wife, recalled these workers were reliable and they were discussing together when they could go to Germany for labour contracts and when they were needed in Romania. However, the general attitude towards seasonal workers was negative. While class-based relations and difference in statuses explains it, we should also mention that such derogatory attitudes and lack of understanding for seasonal workers originate in them being Roma as members of a racialised and marginalised ethnic group. Entrepreneurs' views of agricultural labour vis-à-vis seasonal migrants brings us back to the idea of opposing remittances. Looking at entrepreneurs and seasonal agricultural workers, considering the social and economic marginalization of Roma, we were able to bring to the surface the differences and tensions in their articulation of agricultural labour, which we interpret below as instances of opposing social remittances.

Opposing remittances in Romania's agriculture

The connection between labour and social remittances reflects local and global structures of inequality. The neoliberal migration optimism focuses on human capital and transnational social capital acquisitions through migration with an emphasis on the highly skilled (Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2017). This view serves to reproduce global inequalities through migration, by disregarding uneven development between countries of origin and those of destination (Glick-Schiller, 2009; Nölke & Vliegenthart, 2009). In this broader debate, there is a need to assess the role of class in labour and social remittances transfers and only a few studies reflect on how representations of labour

change in context of out-migration and return and what new inequalities and tensions there emerge. Migrants tend to internalise practices and, with them, contradictions of the Western labour regime: precarity, flexibilisation and the general crisis of paid labour (Haynes & Galasińska, 2016; Karolak, 2016). Migration scholars often insist on the positive side of labour conditions in developed countries, highlighting personal and professional development opportunities, more humane labour relations, better life-work balance and rights more respect including language acquisition and transcultural communication (Grabowska, 2018). In contrast, the labour environment in countries of origin is often considered less open to the soft skills brought by returnees (Haynes & Galasińska, 2016). In these studies, inequalities and contradictions in social remitting "at home" are rarely addressed, even though there are many studies on economic inequality and financial remittances (Anwar et al., 2024). Looking into how different categories of returnees (entrepreneurs and seasonal workers) articulate labour differently, our study brings forward the fluidity of class and racial positions in relation to agricultural work and food production.

Entrepreneurs seemed more able to value the qualifications and knowledge they acquired abroad, seen as a proof of their self-realisation, praising their own activities yet being often depreciative of seasonal labourers. For them, these labourers were not sufficiently motivated to acquire knowledge, and their labour was therefore deemed of lower quality. As most seasonal workers in the area studies are Roma, entrepreneurs' narratives are often caught in racist terms. Intersecting class and racial or ethnic inequality needs further clarifications and unpacking. During the research it surfaced that possessing substantial financial resources and larger land surfaces proved decisive for entrepreneurs. In contrast, Romanian and Roma seasonal workers had not similar possessions. The Roma in the region were largely deprived and often uneducated, many practising seasonal agricultural work to this day. Besides, entrepreneurs' general disregard of hard working conditions is striking in a business sector relying heavily on seasonal workers. Agricultural mechanisation and intensification were also regarded differently: entrepreneurs looked at them primarily as a function of farms' profitability and less on their effects on workers; seasonal migrants regarded mechanisation through the effects on their bodies and we have discerned no difference between Roma and the non-Roma in this respect. Seasonal migrants further focus on their readiness to work hard and demand fair labour conditions in Romania.

In our cases, we have analysed opposing remittances produced mainly by different class positions of returnees. Yet, racialised ethnicity plays out, especially when the Roma sense self-realisation and social recognition through migration, becoming apparent in our study when Roma returnees are struggling against deeply-seated anti-Roma racism (Anghel & Fosztó, 2022). This recomposes retrospectively and strategically the more humane and dignified labour relations they reportedly experienced when working in Western farms. Our paper signals that further research should be done in order to incorporate age, education and gender in the analysis of return migration in the Romanian agriculture. Especially when social remittances articulate opposing class views and aspirations among returnees, such research puts class relations more firmly within the migration and development debates, similar to the research agenda on gender and remittances (for the Romanian case see Vlase (2013).

Accordingly, even though entrepreneurs and seasonal workers are all returnees, their narratives encapsulate opposed positions on agricultural labour. Returning to social remittances, the 'selectivity argument' is directly useful for understanding the framing of labour by returnees in Romanian agriculture. This argument considers social remittances as not travelling "in a suitcase" (Boccagni & Decimo, 2013), but as actively selected and changed by migrants and returnees during processes of social remitting (Levitt, 2001; Grabowska et al., 2017). Our research indicates how selection is shaped by migrants' class and racial positions, therefore leading to opposing social remittances, where returnees articulate opposed views of labour.

Tangible and intangible elements are entangled in opposing remittances concerning labour relations. As there are their consequences – the growing labour demand is only aggravating by the departure of the Roma from Romanian agriculture whose migration to Germany is enhanced not just by better payments but by perceived better treatment. Our understanding is that the opposing remittances discussed above translate to the local level the structural tensions and contradictions inherent in agricultural labour (Van der Ploeg, 2018). In Europe, migrant labour is omnipresent not only in intensive agriculture, but also in the smaller-scale agro-ecological farms and in agro-pastoralism. Research on Romanian migration has been mostly framed in the European geography of migration (Stan & Erne, 2014). It is however also part of the global landscape of labour mobility and, more significantly, of the global food regime (Findlay & McCollum, 2013) showing the interrelatedness of different modes of food production in countries of origin and destination. Focusing on labour and labour relations among seasonal migrants and entrepreneurs, this perspective offers a view on labour exploitation (Nori & Farinella, 2020; Palumbo et al., 2022; Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010) and labour intensification (King et al. 2021), different from the views addressed by the standard literature. From a structural perspective, return migration plays a key role in the reproduction and adaptation of capitalist relations in the East European agriculture. This perspective contributes to research on the interconnections between structural economic inequality and migration in Europe (Nölke & Vliegenthart, 2009) and on processes which produce migrants as 'assets' (Glick-Schiller, 2009) in the global economy.

Conclusions

Romania is a major provider of cheap and mobile labour for Western Europe. Especially in agriculture, it has developed a complex web of formal and informal practices of channelling workers abroad. Such large-scale changes in the geography of labour are facilitated by numerous economic and political factors, being largely determined by the development gap between Western and Eastern Europe and by the EU's politics of labour. Alongside these structural factors, the ways in which migrants articulate their work abroad contributes immensely to the labour drain from the region, thus contributing to the functioning of the EU's agriculture and to its position in the global food regime.

This paper reveals how agricultural labour in countries of origin is influenced by the combined processes of migration and return. While much of the ongoing debates target regions of destination and the effects of seasonal migration in rural areas and food production in Western Europe, our approach looks at countries of origin that are also important players in food production. Unlike the idea that social remittances have

typically a positive role and a transformative potential in countries of origin, following a broader cultural and economic hierarchy between countries of origin and destination, we employed a critical approach looking at contradictions and frictions that social remittances produce in countries of origin. Decidedly, class, racialized ethnicity and social inequality are key issues in this respect and migration is reflected differently by different categories of returnees.

Engaging critically with the selectivity argument of the social remittances literature, we have examined how returnees in Romania, entrepreneurs and seasonal migrants reflect and negotiate agricultural labour. Their rearticulation of agricultural labour is deeply connected to social inequalities. Recognising social remittances as contrasting or opposing in relation to class or other types of inequality, as this paper argued, provides a fruitful way to address the development potential of migration. In the Romanian context, migration does not only reconfigures local agriculture, but generates new challenges for agriculture and for local communities in general. We have discovered a more complex landscape of agricultural labour relations which is significantly different from the uncritical optimism of remittances that is constantly reproduced in the narratives of Romanian and other migrations.

Through the analysis of agricultural labour, we draw attention to how remittances are unpacked in specific social contexts. Then we demonstrate how intangibility matters especially when it does not stay intangible and produce material consequences; in our case, when it affects the livelihoods of agricultural workers, when it transforms agricultural practices and labour relations in agriculture. The normative expectations of migrant workers and entrepreneurs are activated when they engage in labour relations. This is where and when acquired ideas from destination countries about labour conditions, fair wages, but also about profitability and efficiency are deployed on the ground, in this case in agriculture and food production. Not the least, such opposing remittances and class relations are deeply involved in the incorporation of migrant agricultural labour in the global food regime.

Acknowledgements
The authors thank editors of the special issue for their generous suggestions for improving the paper.

Author contributions
Both authors participated to the research design, data collection, interpretation and the theoretical part of the paper. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding
Not applicable.

Data availability
The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical approval
The research complies to the Ethics Code of the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities, 298/Nov 7th, 2023.

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Received: 12 September 2024 / Accepted: 27 January 2026
Published online: 02 February 2026

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