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Romania's agricultural workers. Return mobilities and modes of food production

Remus Gabriel Anghel[1,2] | Lucian Vesalon[3] | Stefánia Toma[2,4]

[1]National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, București, Romania

[2]Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities, Cluj Napoca, Romania

[3]West University of Timișoara, Romania

[4]Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Correspondence
Remus Gabriel Anghel, SNSPA, Facultatea de Științe Politice, Bd. Expoziției30A, Bucharest, Romania.
Email: remus-gabriel.anghel@politice.ro

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of Romanian seasonal migration and its effects on farming and rural areas. We connect labour migration to changes in modes of food production in Western and Eastern Europe. Based on the fieldwork in seven Romanian localities with 40 semi-structured interviews, we interrogate how seasonal work is shaped by regimes of mobility and economic and social inequalities. Studying the case of Romania's large rural population raises critical questions regarding migration, development and change in rural areas. Answering such questions requires disentangling different categories of seasonal migrants and their return prospects. Looking at how agricultural labour is structured, we examine labour experiences and analyse how migrants' agency operates in precarious contexts. Observing the consequences of seasonal migration and return, we discovered diverging processes of agricultural diversification through entrepreneurialism and a radical change in peasant farming resulting in an increased concentration of farmland.

INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to current debates on the agriculture-migration nexus (King et al., 2021; Lulle, 2021; Scott & Rye, 2021) by focusing on Romanian migration and its effects on Romanian agriculture. Recently, there has been a growing interest in analysing migration in Western European agriculture. Employing a migrant-centred perspective, existing research focuses on seasonal migration and labour experiences, as well as on discernible effects of migration on rural areas in Western Europe (Corrado et al., 2016; Nori & Farinella, 2020; Rye & Scott, 2018).

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Our aim is to contribute to these debates by looking at the effects of seasonal migration on the agriculture of the country of origin, an issue that has received less attention in the recent literature. In this sense, we interrogate the interconnectedness between Western and Eastern European modes of food production and seasonal migration within the broader global food regime (Bernstein, 2016; McMichael, 2009). In this article, we examine how migration relates to different types of farms in the country of origin (Van der Ploeg, 2008). Secondly, we place migrants' agency within the specific context of EU-free mobility (Favell, 2011). Our theoretical perspective is further enriched by looking at the intersection of agriculture migration and social inequality (Bock et al., 2016; Brovia & Piro, 2021). While migration deeply affects Romanian society in general, the mobility of seasonal workers and returnees in agriculture may have diverse impacts on agriculture at home.

We first lay out our theoretical perspective, connecting arguments from the field of migration in agriculture (Rye & O'Reilly, 2021) and from migration and development (Delgado-Wise & Covarrubias, 2009; King, 2022). To understand the effects of seasonal migration on Romanian agriculture, we first discuss Romania's large rural population and how migration developed in Romania's rural regions. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2021 and 2022 in a series of localities in Romania, we examine how seasonal work structures indoor and outdoor activities, job difficulty and payment and how different categories of migrants are involved in these activities abroad. In the final section, we investigate the different roles of returnees within Romanian agriculture: precarious outdoor seasonal migrant workers and agricultural entrepreneurs. Instead of looking at the effects of migration on development more broadly, we look at the contrasting changes in agricultural practices in peasant, entrepreneurial and capitalist farming (Van der Ploeg, 2008). Reflecting on the migration of agricultural workers as a global issue, but with a focus on the country of origin, we aim to contribute to the current academic debates and public conversations around three interrelated themes: the construction of regimes and modes of food production; labour dynamics in agriculture and the discernible effects of return migration upon agriculture.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: MODES OF FOOD PRODUCTION, REGIMES OF LABOUR MOBILITY AND RETURN MIGRATION

The global crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic generated public debates around agricultural workers from Eastern Europe who continued to migrate to Western European farms in spite of mobility and sanitary restrictions—a necessary action given their role as essential workers ensuring EU food security (Anghel & Trandafoiu, 2021; Paul, 2020; Tougeron & Hance, 2021). Romania is an important reservoir of seasonal workers and much of the existing research has been done from a host country perspective (Fratsea & Papadopoulos, 2021; Geddes & Scott, 2010; Milbourne & Coulson, 2021; Nori & Farinella, 2020; Șerban et al., 2021; Voivozeanu, 2020). The geographical selection of cases is also fairly limited to countries with a significant share of Romanian migrants: Spain, Italy, Germany, Greece and the UK.

Many studies on agricultural workers focus on contexts of destination (Garrapa, 2016; Gertel & Sippel, 2014; Milbourne & Coulson, 2021; Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010). Agriculture and migration are deeply interconnected and they form a particular nexus both in the core countries and in semi-peripheries: 'agri-food production and human migration have several mutual linkages that co-construct and shape each other' (King et al., 2021, p. 52). There are different regimes of mobility enhancing this relationship: managed mobility (Menz, 2010) involving programs and procedures in the selection and bringing-in of migrants; and mobility regimes in which migrants come and go with ease, as is the case of Eastern European migrants in Western Europe (Favell, 2011). In this context, Eastern European rural areas have become a terrain of labour extraction for the agri-food industries of much more economically developed Western economies and there are important connections between the agriculture–migration and development–migration nexuses (King et al., 2021).

The currently dominant food regime has been given various labels: the neoliberal food regime, the global food regime, the corporate food regime, etc. In the Friedman-McMichael (2005) approach, this 'third food regime' or

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'corporate-environmental food regime' (Friedman, 2005) emerged in the 1970s, before expanding and multiplying rapidly at the global scale. Neoliberalism is one of its constitutive elements and globalization the other. Both explain its evolution as largely determined by the 'transnational space of corporate agriculture' (McMichael, 2005). Furthermore, current debates on the importance of environmental politics (Friedman, 2005) and the greening of agricultural production—as a key component of the corporate food regime—recognize that such developments are made possible through increased industrialisation and technological progress, but this also leads to more labour-intensive practices. In this context, the steady demand for cheap, flexible, seasonal, both low- and high-skilled labour often prompts stakeholders and academics to speak about agriculture's dependency on migrant labour (Bernstein, 2016; Findlay & McCollum, 2013).

Alongside food regimes, we use the concept of 'modes of food production' to account for the geographical variations of agri-food production (Kneafsey et al., 2021). Understanding how modes of food production are composed is essential to attempts at articulating alternatives to the current global food regime (Holloway et al., 2007). In Eastern Europe, modes of food production have been mostly developed in relation to EU enlargement. EU's free movement policies have facilitated the agricultural migration of Eastern Europeans, including Romanians. We further advance our understanding of modes of food production by heuristically using the distinction between different modes of farming: peasant, entrepreneurial and capitalist farming (Van der Ploeg, 2008). In this respect, we investigate the role of seasonal migrants and returnees in capitalist and entrepreneurial farming, as well as looking at family or household-based farming.

The migration of Eastern European agricultural workers continuously raises concerns regarding precariousness and exploitation (Bock et al., 2016; Cosma et al., 2020; O'Reilly & Rye, 2021). Labour and living conditions vary significantly across destination countries and labour sites. There are also differences with respect to countries of origin—between migrants from different Eastern European countries, and also between those coming from Eastern Europe and other world regions, such as Africa, who may be even more disadvantaged (Voivozeanu, 2020). The feminization of agricultural labour from Eastern Europe (Avallone, 2016; Croitoru, 2018) further signals abuse, mistreatment and, in extreme situations, rape and sequestration. Social inequality often engenders illegal work and open rejection from the local population (Boels, 2016). The opportunities opened up by recruitment agencies are appreciated by many seasonal workers, although abuses are worryingly frequent (Findlay & McCollum, 2013; Sporton, 2013). Although there is evidence of better, longer-term working contracts for Eastern European workers (Garrapa, 2016), the precariousness of migrant—and especially seasonal—labour (Rye & Scott, 2018) remains central in the political economy of agri-food production. Accordingly, while trying to explain why Eastern Europeans still continue working in Western agriculture, we need not only to contextualize different forms of exploitation, but also to unfold migrants' agency in trying to evade these different forms of exploitation.

Finally, return migration and its impact on agriculture reveals the connectedness between modes of food production in Western and Eastern Europe. Two classical arguments shape the debates on the relationship between migration and economy, including agriculture. The first argument is that migration induces development and encourages the role of migrants and returnees in transferring remittances and skills at home (Sinatti, 2022). Consequently, there are differences in such transfers in relation to migrants' qualifications, knowledge, savings and length of migration (King, 2022). Return migration is seen as an avenue of economic growth. Returnees may fare better upon return in comparison to non-migrants (Hagan & Wassink, 2020), while returned entrepreneurs may induce diversified economic outcomes and develop new business avenues either as needs-based (or self-employed) entrepreneurs able to make ends meet or—more commonly—as innovative, sometimes transnational entrepreneurs (Faist et al., 2013, pp. 37–39; King, 2022). If this migrant-centred perspective focuses on returnees' agency and portrays a positive impact of migration, the second argument assumes a state-centred perspective. It stresses the 'development of underdevelopment' (Frank, 1966): by depleting large labour force from countries of origin, migration generates productive disarticulation, thereby perpetuating the underdevelopment of dependent economies (Delgado-Wise & Covarrubias, 2009). In agriculture, for instance, even when returnees may come with

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more capital to invest (King, 2022), structural constraints such as a lack of technologisation and the capitalisation of agriculture may play a vital role in underdevelopment (Massey et al., 1993).

In the following section, we ground Romanian agricultural migration within processes of post-communist rural population dynamics and international migration. We further analyse how Romanian migrants participate in different agricultural activities abroad and inquire into the ways in which inequality influences this migration. We then examine how agricultural work is structured into long and short term, indoor and outdoor, and how migrants adapt to different types of agricultural work. Finally, the effects of agricultural out-migration on agriculture in Romania helps us to further inquire into how different modes of food production are interconnected via agricultural migrant workers.

ROMANIA'S RURAL POPULATION AND MIGRATION IN AGRICULTURE

Romania is a country with large rural population. Until 1989, when communism collapsed, much of this population was involved in socialist agricultural farms, while those employed in industry were often commuting between villages and socialist industrial plants. Besides industrial work, commuters very regularly maintained small-scale agricultural activities (Turnock, 1991). After the fall of communism in 1989, the rural economy collapsed: agricultural cooperatives disbanded and commuters were among the first to lose their jobs when industry shrunk (Chelcea & Mateescu, 2005). Romania's rural population represents 41.4% of the total population, the largest share in the EU. The integration of Romanian agriculture in the global food regime takes place through large farms, which represent about 0.9% of existing farms, but account for over 50% of agricultural land (Eurostat, 2022). The result is an 'extremely polarized agricultural structure' (Feher et al., 2017, p. 675) between very small and very large farm holds. In that context, many villages became quasi-autarchic in post-socialism, with households producing food for their own consumption (Chelcea & Mateescu, 2005). Many people from rural areas had to migrate abroad in order to make ends meet (Stan & Erne, 2014). With some variations, similar processes also unfolded in other post-socialist regions (Lulle, 2021).

After 1989, migration emerged as a major process involving much of Romania's rural population (Alexe et al., 2012). Migration from rural areas was, however, not predominantly targeting agriculture, but rather Western European secondary labour markets in urban centres, especially in construction and services. International migration started to develop towards the end of the 1990s as a sustained process, with Romania's population becoming one of the most mobile in the whole of Europe (Anghel, 2013). For Romania's rural areas, international migration was the main route out of economic decay, unemployment and poverty. A series of studies conducted up to the late 2000s (Anghel, 2016) analyse Romania's rural migration predominantly towards constructions and care work, but also towards industry, stressing that migration was organized by migrant networks. Over the years, recruitment programs and intermediaries developed (Șerban et al., 2021). In several cases (Anghel, 2013; Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009), migration to agriculture was the initial step of a longer migration journey: migrants went initially to agriculture and later prolonged their stay and took other, better-paid jobs. Some other studies (Fratsea & Papadopoulos, 2021; Horváth, 2008; Szabó, 2018; Voivozeanu, 2020) unfold cases of seasonal migration. As a consequence of the strong labour migration from Romania, many rural areas lost a sizable part of their population (Alexe et al., 2012). While at the beginning of the 1990s Romania had a large surplus of workers from rural areas, this situation changed dramatically, largely due to long-term migration, making Romania a still significant, but largely reduced, potential source of seasonal migration in agriculture.

Next we introduce our methodology, followed by an empirical section on different patterns of seasonal work in agriculture, including processes of job selection. We try to capture migrants' experiences and their understanding of agricultural migration. The paper then examines the effects of migration on Romania's agriculture. It argues that because of massive out-migration, an interplay emerges between modes of food production in Western and Eastern Europe, with a differentiated impact on the global food regime.

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METHODOLOGY

We carried out fieldwork in a series of localities in the region of southern Transylvania, Romania, where we conducted most of our interviews. Four interviews were carried out in the region of Banat in the Western part of the country, while another five were conducted in the eastern and north-western part of Transylvania. We have used theoretical sampling (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) to obtain interviews with people of different social profiles. We have selected 40 interviews from a larger sample in total, that were a mix of semi-structured and unstructured. Although most interviews were carried out in rural areas, the data set is quite varied since interviewees had different economic status, ethnicity and experiences of migration. Four interviews were carried out in urban areas. We have used a wide definition of returnees to include those who returned temporarily or for longer periods of time (Fauser & Anghel, 2019). We defined migrants as those with at least 6 months of migratory experience and returnees as those who returned after such periods of time. Most interviews were with returnees (31), both seasonal workers (11) and returnee entrepreneurs in agriculture (14). Four of these entrepreneurs have been seasonal agricultural workers in the past. There were also six returnees having other types of employment and six entrepreneurs in agriculture without migratory experience abroad. Finally, we interviewed three migrants from France, the UK and Germany, two of them being entrepreneurs. From all entrepreneurs, four had larger companies—one migrant and three returnees—with the rest being small-scale entrepreneurs.

Altogether we interviewed 22 men and 18 women: six were in their 20s, 13 in their 30s, 14 in their 40s, five in their 50s, one was in her 60s and one was 70 years old. Eight interviews were carried out with vulnerable Roma, all of whom were seasonal workers, and five interviews were conducted with small-scale Hungarian agricultural entrepreneurs. Interviews were carried out between Summer 2021 and Spring 2022. Although seasonal agricultural work was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and fieldwork was difficult, we conducted the research during periods of time with no lockdown restrictions. People reported that the pandemic had previously impacted their migration, but had little impact on their plans when we conducted the fieldwork.

Interviews with returnees first captured their migration and labour experiences abroad. We asked questions about their prior jobs and return plans. Returned entrepreneurs were asked not only about their migratory experiences and remittances but also about their personal strategies of participating in the agri-food market. We included interviews with non-migrant entrepreneurs and migrants to Romania involved in agriculture in order to obtain a richer picture of agricultural entrepreneurship, opportunities and hindrances. Finally, very few returnees from urban areas were employed as workers for mushroom farms and therefore provided information that was not available from other returnees, i.e., those who worked outdoors.

ROMANIA'S MIGRATION IN WESTERN EUROPEAN AGRICULTURE

Recent research describes a multiplicity of migratory patterns and types of labour in Western European agriculture, most often temporary (Findlay & McCollum, 2013; Scott & Rye, 2021). Migration from Romania's rural areas includes multiple patterns, as described in the previous section. Most migrants we interviewed have worked in Western Europe a few months a year, mostly in the spring, summer and autumn. Recruitment in Western European agriculture was conducted via multiple channels: recruiting companies in Romania for German and other European farms; social ties and networks, usually of neighbours and co-villagers; local informal recruiters and internet portals. For seasonal migrants, labour abroad is structured according to various factors: difficulty; level of salary; whether it is long-term or seasonal; whether it is outdoor (in the fields) or indoor (in factories in the mushroom industry); whether it involves picking or carrying activities and whether it is performed on animal, vegetable or fruit farms. Among these activities, working in mushroom factories seems to be most preferred, and working in vineyards and orchards is considered easier than on vegetable farms. In contrast to the situation of workers tied to certain contracts and employers (Garrapa, 2016; Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010)—and similar to other Romanian

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migrants (Fratsea & Papadopoulos, 2021; Voivozeanu, 2020)—our interviewees seemed more able to navigate between jobs, employers and countries.

Working in mushroom factories stands out as the preferred employment: labour is needed the whole year and it is considered better paid, with workers receiving about 1500 euros per month—more than double the Romania average salary of 800 euros per month (ZF, 2023). Workers in these factories have various socio-economic backgrounds: from youngsters who work temporarily to women in their 50s from urban and rural areas. Anișoara, for instance, is a woman in her 50s from a small Transylvanian town, who went to Germany to work in a mushroom factory 5 years ago. She considered the work not that difficult, but complained about her Romanian co-workers and saw the job as demeaning. Unlike her, Constantin, a man in his 30s with a university degree, had been employed in sales in Romania and wanted to experience living abroad. He also went to a mushroom factory in Germany. He considered the company to be well-organized and offering decent working and living conditions. Therefore, he prolonged his stay from 3 months to almost 1 year. There were two categories of workers in these plants: 'pickers', usually women (such as Anișoara), who pick and sort mushrooms; and 'carriers', usually men (such as Constantin), who carry mushroom crates. Some German-speaking workers enabled communication with the plant management. Many worked temporarily, but there were also many who stayed for longer periods of time. Besides those working in mushroom plants, we have also identified some other cases of longer-term migrants working in agriculture. Some migrants worked harvesting lettuces in French fields. It was a temporary activity yet better paid then their usual salaries as non-qualified workers. Other interviewees worked seasonally and mostly outdoors.

From five villages in the southern Transylvania, seasonal migration to Germany involved many deprived ethnic Roma. Most of them considered labour conditions and payments satisfactory. This perception differs from the exploitative conditions and labour precariousness discussed in various studies on agricultural work (Bock et al., 2016; Brovia & Piro, 2021; Howard & Forin, 2019; Rye & Scott, 2018). However this shall be regarded circumstantially, as these workers were already exploited in Romania and marginalized in their localities of origin. They often went to salad and cucumber fields, or to animal agriculture in southern Germany, preferring to work for the same employers or to remain in the same area. Salaries were low in comparison to German standards, with workers receiving around nine euros per hour (gross), or a bit above 1000 euros per month net salary. Occasionally, they also worked in various amusement parks in Germany. In one instance, Marin recollected how he worked in animal husbandry, considering that the job was better paid and had better living conditions than jobs on open-air farms. Various people who worked in orchards and vineyards during the picking period said that they considered these contracts 'easy' and Marin recalled that he liked the fact that 'you are allowed to eat fruits and grapes'.

Agricultural work is not only physically demanding. There are also cases of abuse (Findlay & McCollum, 2013; Sporton, 2013). As Ioan said, informal recruitment may leave room for foul play. He recalled a woman in his village who spoke German and who intermediated contracts between German farmers and Romanian labourers, taxing and cheating the workers by providing false information on payments and labour conditions. Others also recalled German employers who mistreated workers (offering unbearable living and working conditions and requiring extensive working hours). In such cases—and in the context of the EU's free mobility regime—migrants simply left their jobs and returned to Romania. As there is a rich demand for agricultural labour abroad, changing jobs is not difficult. However, our interviewees said that they tended not to change farms if possible. In one locality they tended to go abroad in larger groups of co-villagers and friends, only sometimes trying new offers.

At the same time, even when migrants are comfortable with living and earning conditions, their assessments shall be regarded circumstantially, keeping in mind the meagre salaries and poor living conditions in Romania. Even though the average Romanian salary increased in the past years, many poor people with whom we conducted interviews were unemployed or severely underpaid. In some of the localities where we conducted the research, most of the temporary workers were Roma and they considered the working conditions abroad better, even when working more than 50 hours per week. As Ion said, 'we worked as much as we could, sometimes I worked more

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than 16 hours a day. When you go there, you go to make money, not to relax'. We found similar attitudes among other migrants too—people aiming to maximize the incomes by overworking.

Our interviewed migrants often considered seasonal work as differentiated by: indoor and outdoor activities; level of difficulty; hardship; and trustworthiness of employers. Whereas indoor activities involved both urban and rural populations, outdoor activities involved mostly poor rural populations, were more difficult and less well paid. In the localities where we carried out fieldwork, it emerged that seasonal work in outdoor agriculture involved the poorest part of the population. This confirms that social inequalities contribute to agri-food production in the Western European farms where Romanian seasonal workers are employed (Cosma et al., 2020). In addition, stories of migrant workers in agriculture are multifaceted and reflect particular social and geographical contexts. They also develop from the ways in which migrants' subjectivities interact with given economic frameworks, resulting in different personal scenarios of migration. Furthermore, as migrants stressed, most of them worked on medium and larger farms, and less on small household farms. The differences in these modes of food production also contribute to the consolidation of 'migrant hierarchies' (Lulle, 2021). In the localities where we carried out the research agricultural work usually involves poor labourers, although some of those that are now entrepreneurs also performed agricultural work in Western Europe in the past. In the following section, we discuss some of the contradictory effects of migration on agriculture: both the emerging constraints due to the lack of workforce and the growing diversification of agricultural production due to returnees' new enterprises.

DIVERSITY OR MONOCULTURE? MIGRATION AND CHANGING MODES OF FOOD PRODUCTION IN ROMANIA

Examining the connections between return migration and the agri-food sector in Romania, we have observed two distinct impacts of migration upon localities of origin: the emergence of migrant entrepreneurialism and the growing labour demand in local agriculture. These connections are less expected from a mainstream development perspective, which projects optimistic expectations regarding the reduction of economic disparities between Eastern and Western Europe (de Haas, 2010). First, although entrepreneurialism is expected to generate relative wealth (Sinatti, 2022), this is not necessarily the case for many Romanian entrepreneurs in agriculture, with only a small number considering themselves successful. They developed businesses in the wine, fruit, meat, vegetable or cereal industries, opening animal farms, plantations or small-scale food production facilities. Their labour experience in Western agriculture is often limited and only some of them were previously seasonal workers. For the others, there was no work experience abroad. Others, having had the opportunity to work abroad before returning to work in agriculture in Romania, experienced an occupational channelling, which facilitated transnational transfers of knowledge and human capital (Hagan & Wassink, 2020; Sinatti, 2022).

Some of these entrepreneurs have expressed scepticism regarding the development or even survival of their businesses in the long run. For instance, Martin, one of the most successful returnees, worked on animal farms in Germany for a long period of time. When he received his family land property back after 1989, he was able to start a business with a cow farm. Over the years he had a local breed of cow and, for a short period of time, Transylvanian buffaloes. Facing management difficulties and lack of personnel, he chose to replace the milk cows with meat cows, which required less labour: 'here nobody wants to work in agriculture anymore … they go to Germany seasonally and they get 9 to 12 Euros an hour' (Martin). Similarly, Ioana's friend, George—along with some other returnees—returned from Italy and opened a small blueberry plantation. Similar to Martin, they started to experience a shortage of workers and their businesses stalled. 'There are no workers, nobody comes now to trim the bushes, or to gather the berries. My boyfriends' cousin has a big plantation and they share some workers. Roma worked here and now they go to Spain to pick strawberries and to Germany to pick berries … they come back in September but this is too late for us.' In a different part of Transylvania, there are also entrepreneurs—such as Alin who opened a chicken farm and was able to maintain a local network of customers—who succeeded

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with their small-scale business. Others remained self-employed and at best could deliver some farmed products among acquaintances or in their places of origin. Accordingly, most cases are of self-employed and small-scale entrepreneurial farmers (Hagan & Wassink, 2020) who are not able or do not want to engage in capitalist farming, cultivating larger fields or setting up larger companies.

Effects of migration in agriculture on local farming are multiple and go beyond the emergence of small-scale entrepreneurship. As in other areas of Romania, part of the population in some of the villages in southern Transylvania practiced subsistence peasant farming, involving animal husbandry and the cultivation of vegetables and cereals, some of which were used as animal feed. Food production was labour intensive and highly dependent on disposable workers, who were often the poor local Roma who worked as daily labourers for Romanian households or local farms. For two decades after the collapse of communism, this mode of combined peasant farming and small-scale entrepreneurial farming continued and villagers were not able to get better market access. They sold some products to nearby dairy factories and provided cheap food in their region. Workers were poorly paid and had long working hours. As George remembers, 'we were poor, we were sometimes working mainly in exchange for meals.' With the onset and development of seasonal migration in agriculture, the available labour force visibly shrunk. Migration had a strong effect at the local level, affecting not only individual households unable to rely on the local poor as daily workers, but also all farms in the region. As Marian, the manager of a hop farm, recalls, 'when I needed workers a few years ago, I had plenty of them, now I can barely get a few workers to do the work'. The solution for Marian was to cancel future development plans and to maintain the scale of hop harvesting, despite the growing demand. Similar stories were told by various returnee entrepreneurs and many other local people while discussing the labour scarcity that farms experience.

Another effect of migration is on the variety of agri-food produce. In the Transylvanian Highlands there was historically a rich biodiversity, which is now in decline. It is a hilly area with forests, pastures and agricultural fields that had a diverse food production, though was little technologized. There were a number of medium size farms cultivating corn, grains and alfalfa and raising animals. Families also cultivated small land plots to provide for household consumption of vegetables. Until recently, these lands were not usually chemically fertilized and manual labour was extensively used. This mode of self-sustaining and independent peasant farming is currently changing although it is considered an asset of this region, mainly in relation to the development of its agro-tourism potential.

With the increase in migration, many abandoned their prior agricultural practices. As Daniel said, 'agriculture is difficult, much work is needed and people don't do it anymore'. Maria, another co-villager, complained that she can no longer buy food produced locally: 'now I struggle to get milk and eggs from villagers. I wish they still had their animals'. She also admits that people started buying food from the local shops, instead of producing it, that youngsters are no longer interested in agriculture and many have migrated, and that the elderly decreased their farming activities. Villagers stopped gathering hay, and abandoned animal husbandry and other crops. Similarly, farmers replaced local milk cows with meat cows and quit raising buffaloes, as in the story told by Martin. As they abandoned animal husbandry, they no longer need diverse crops and mainly reoriented towards cereals that are sold on the market. Thus, the diverse food production that previously prevailed was gradually replaced by monocultures in local farms and a strong decrease of agricultural production in individual households. In turn, this also led to an accelerated loss of biodiversity (Tsiafouli et al., 2015). In the recent years, smaller peasant farms were replaced by larger capitalist farms run by foreign companies planting cereals on land leased or bought from villagers. Accordingly, similar to other cases, agricultural labour migration is 'reshaping the demography and social texture of rural regions' (King et al., 2021, p. 52). In our study areas, we have identified three types of change: disinvestment of labour from local agriculture due to seasonal work abroad, emergence of small-scale and vulnerable agriculture entrepreneurship, and the tendency towards monoculture in regions that previously had diverse agricultural production. In these cases, peasant farming has been shrinking and there is a move from family farming to a more concentrationist model, similar to other countries in Europe (Van der Ploeg et al., 2015).

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CONCLUSIONS

Placing Romanian migration in the context of European agriculture opens up important debates on the political economy of global food production. Romanian migration provides a significant input of labour in the EU's agricultural industry and it does so with massive consequences on migrants themselves and on their country of origin. This article brings to the fore the structural economic and social inequalities which underpin the formation of a migrant labour system in EU agriculture based on seasonal supply from Eastern Europe (Medland, 2017). Critical analyses of labour migration have routinely revealed the precariousness of workers employed in agriculture (Fudge, 2012; Gertel & Sippel, 2014; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Indeed, our case indicates the global food regime produces so-called 'food from nowhere' (McMichael, 2009). It is also food produced by 'nobody'—that is, by 'invisible' migrant labourers from the global (semi-)peripheries.

We have entered this debate by unfolding the diversity of agricultural migrants. We have analysed: how migrants access jobs in agriculture; the variety of migrants' profiles; and a structuration of agricultural work into indoor and outdoor activities, better paid and lower paid jobs, and more difficult or easier ones. While indoor activities attracted a diverse population of migrants, outdoor agricultural jobs—and especially the most difficult one—attracted a poor rural population. In the region of origin, the same poor population is missing from local peasant and entrepreneurial farms, thus changing existing agricultural practices. East–West migration in agriculture has enabled a culture of low-waged labour, a process in which 'the vulnerability of migrant farmworkers has been actively engineered' by agri-food actors (Milbourne & Coulson, 2021). The precarity of migrant agricultural work is embedded in the political economy of agri-food production and 'the continued reliance on migrant workers needs to be understood as a state- and corporate-led mechanism for devaluing labour and maintaining inequality within the agri-food sector' (Milbourne & Coulson, 2021).

Although not all migrants in agriculture have peasant origins, many Romanian agricultural migrants in Western and Southern Europe originate in the rural space. Migration affects the rural world from which they hail, as well as raising significant problems pertaining to the modes of food production in the European peripheries. In the currently growing literature on migration in agriculture and its effects in Western European rural regions, there is a need to better address the effects of this migration in countries of origin as well as migrants' participation in the wider European agri-food sector. In the regions where we conducted fieldwork, seasonal migration affects mostly smaller farms. At the same time, there is a feeble agricultural entrepreneurship that—in a context of labour scarcity and scarce access to consumer markets—cannot develop in the long run. A combined result of the global food regime and of seasonal migration in Romania is the continuous concentration of farms in capitalist farming and the spread of monocultures. Migration in agriculture accentuates this process and, from a transnational perspective, it leads to the formation of different but interconnected modes of food production in the centre and in the semi-peripheries of Europe.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We declare there are is no conflict of interests.

PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Remus Gabriel Anghel https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8534-1434
Lucian Vesalon https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3334-4435
Stefánia Toma https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1602-1415

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