

The Anonymous People of Migration (Anonimii Migrației)

The effects of transnational migration on rural families from Sălaj County (Romania)

Valer Simion Cosma,
County Museum of History and Art Zalău

Why this project?

This project continues my previous researches on rural life in Transylvania, in a more specific way, by focusing on one of the most important phenomena which has a great impact and multiple effects on rural communities.

Together with my colleagues, we decided to start a research platform focused on transnational migration and this project represents the first attempt to approach it in order to better understand the local context.

Because we wanted the project to be accessible for the communities we studied, not only for the academic community, we decided to elaborate a methodology that combines scientific with artistic research.

One of the institution's values is to give something back to the communities we explore and also to get a feedback from them on our work.

Sălaj County, one of the most rural county in Transylvania



Population in 2019: 243 750

Census: 2011: 224,384; 2002: 248,015; 1992: 266,797

Sălaj County has 1 municipality, 3 towns and 57 communes, subdivided into 281 villages.

Municipalities: Zalău – capital city; population: 56,202

Towns: Șimleu Silvaniei – population: 14,436; Jibou – population: 10,407; Cehu Silvaniei – population: 7,214.

Ethnic composition of Sălaj County: Romanians (69.05%); Hungarians (23.35%); Romani(6.98%); Slovaks (0.54%); Others (0.18%)

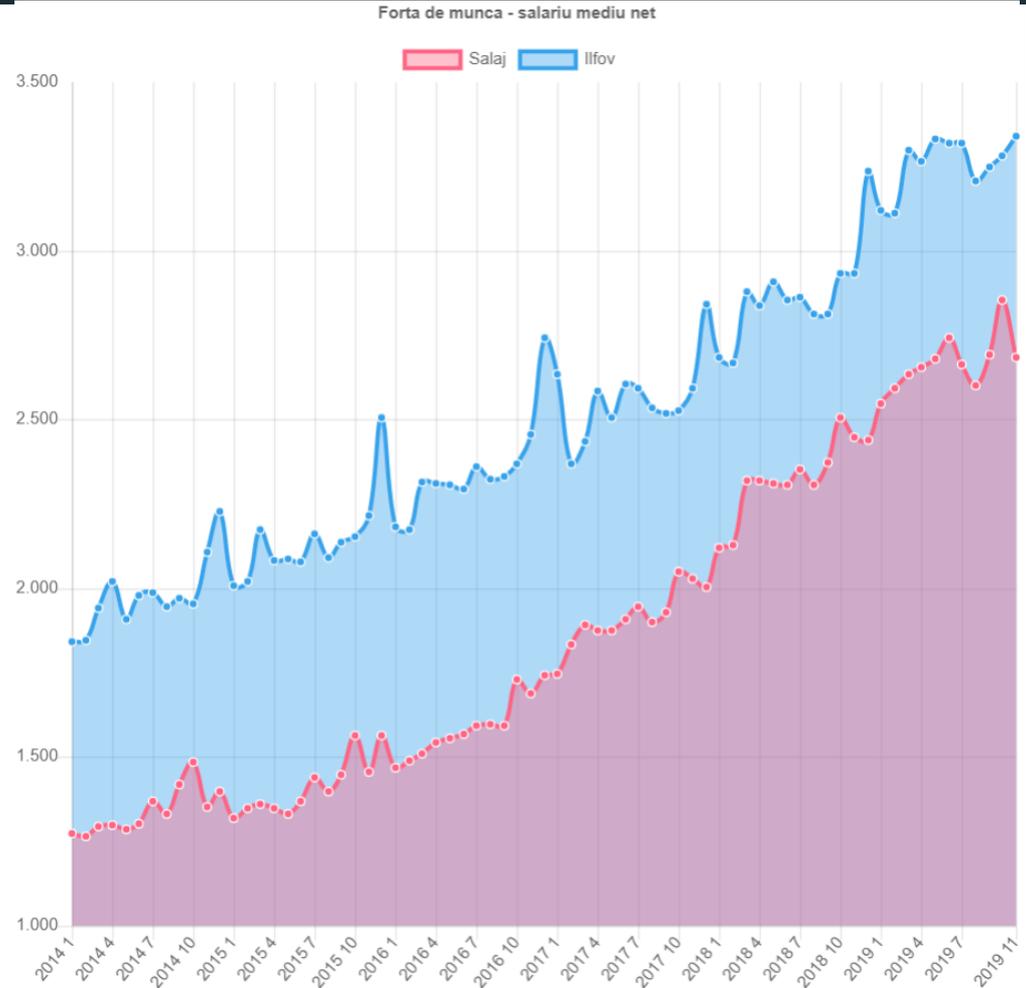
Religious composition of Sălaj County: Orthodox (64.4%); Reformed (19.6%); Pentecostal (4.8%); Baptist (3.9%); Greek Catholic (2.7%); Roman Catholic (2.5%)

If before the financial crisis people were leaving mainly due to the lack of jobs, in the recent years they continued to leave due to the extreme low wages, especially for low qualified jobs.

The interviews conducted during our fieldwork showed that the main reason for searching a job abroad is the wage that is insufficient to sustain a decent life for their families.

The evolution of the minimum wage (with taxes) in the last twenty years:

- 2000: 45€
- 2002: 55€
- 2007: 114€
- 2011: 159€
- 2014: 189€
- 2017: 320€
- 2019: 446€



Life beyond statistics. The Anonymous People of Migration

An important aspect of our research was the focus on the people who were left behind, mainly older people and kids.

Most of existing researches look at the people who leave, naming them immigrants, studying their motivations, personal stories, professional trajectories, and their networks but few are those that discuss the life of those who are left behind.

The migration phenomena is formed by these two categories: the immigrants, as the active part of the process, and those who are left behind, as the passive part of the process.

Although we conducted interviews with persons from both categories, we decided to focus on the so called passive category in order to better understand their lives and their relationships with their family members abroad.



Anonimii Migrației: combining anthropological research with education through art

The aim of the project was to produce a documentary theater-play and a photo-audio exhibition about the effects of transnational migration on families and communities based on anthropological research in three villages.

A team composed of 5 researchers in social sciences and 3 artists spent 3 weeks in 3 villages from Sălaj county. A week in every village. The fieldwork consisted of interviews, observation, informal discussions and forum theatre workshops with the kids from the local schools.

45 interviews and 15 days (6 hours/day) of theatre workshop with approximately 90 pupils.



Valer Simion Cosma - project manager and fieldwork researcher, historian (MJIAZ)

Ágota Ábrán - fieldwork coordinator and researcher, social and cultural anthropologist (MJIAZ)

Corina Bejinariu - fieldwork researcher, manager of the MJIAZ

Iulia-Elena Hossu - fieldwork researcher, researcher at the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities.

Alexandra Voivozeanu - dramaturgist, sociologist

Claudiu Lorand Maxim - theater director

Anda Pop - scenographer

Vlad Petri - photographer, documentary movie director

Doru Taloş - actor, co-producer

Oana Hodade - actress

Panna Adorjáni - musician, theater maker and writer

Bodoki-Halmen Zsolt – musician

Dániel Láng - musician

Lucia Mărneanu - graphic designer, actress

Forum theater* workshops for kids

Being an educational instrument, we used forum theater as a work method in the workshops we held with kids.

We wanted to understand the children`s perspective so instead of interviewing them we explored together different life situations via forum theater method.

The workshops were held by Claudiu Lorand Maxim, the director of the theater play that came out after the research, Anda Pop, the scenographer, and Ágota Ábrán, researcher.

*Forum theater is a type of theatre created by Augusto Boal, one of the techniques under the umbrella term of *Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)*. This relates to the engagement of spectators influencing and engaging with the performance as both spectators and actors, termed "spect-actors", with the power to stop and change the performance. As part of TO, the issues dealt with in forum theatre are often related to areas of social justice with aims to explore solutions to oppression featured in the performance.



The interviews revealed common aspects for the majority of the people:

- Young adults leave their villages in order to raise money to become autonomous: to build a home and a family, to buy a car, or to start a business. All this would be almost impossible in their village or in the towns nearby due to the low wages. Many of them are captivated by the entrepreneurship mirage and they need capital in order to start their own business.
- In many cases, one and sometimes both of the parents work abroad permanently or seasonally while the kids are raised by the grandparents or just by one parent. Many parents we interviewed confessed that they make sacrifices so they can provide access to a better education for their children, especially when it comes to highschool and university studies.



- In the situation when one of the parents works abroad for long periods of time the family dynamics changes, and in some cases this leads to divorce.
- We noticed that many times, when the wives are those who work abroad, fathers takeover their place and gender roles change (men takeover the household). This aspect is very emphasize since we talk about traditional-conservative communities where gender roles are quite stiff.
- It is very difficult for parents to stop working abroad because they are persuaded by their families and/or by the need to reach a certain social status to maintain a decent living standard (building nice big houses with bathrooms inside*, buying cars for themselves and for their kids, affording occasionally holidays with their families etc.)

*Building comfortable bathrooms inside the house is one of the most important effect of transnational migration in the rural area.



- Transnational parenting, via phone and Skype.
- Grandparents are using modern gadgets and are creating Facebook and Skype accounts in order to stay in touch with their children and nephews.
- Emotional problems for parents and children left behind - depression.
- The number of children deprived by maternal care increased in the last years since the percentage of female migrants increased.
- The number of children whose parents are working abroad is undersized by the public authorities. Many parents do not inform the authorities about their situation, especially those who work abroad temporary.
- There are also cases when children take place of the missing parent, assuming tasks that normally were performed by adult parents.



- Regarding Romani people from these communities, they are mainly involved in seasonal migration, working especially in agriculture. With the money they gain they build new houses in the ghetto near the village, but there are also cases when they build new houses in the village or they buy the houses of the people who moved from the village (this happens mostly in Carastelec).
- These transformations provoke two types of reactions from the local communities. On one hand, there are people who have a positive perspective, saying that it is a good way to integrate and "civilize" Romani people. On the other hand, the vast majority of the community have racist attitudes, describing this as an invasion of the village.



- Concerning Hungarian people, they mostly go to work in Hungary or even move there, while keeping strong connections with the communities they left from (here, the proximity factor plays an important role). Also, the local authorities invest a lot in community festivals and ethnic gatherings in order to keep the community tide.
- The almost disappeared Slovak community from Marca Huta (part of Marca), is formed by just 4 families. In the last twenty years most of the population has moved for good to Slovakia and some of them come once a year to visit their parents. In Marca Huta there are only two young people left (a woman and a man, siblings) who couldn't move because they need to take care of their old mother who refuses to leave the village. They have a very small farm and every year they work for few months in agriculture in Germany, one at a time.



The theater play *Sunt una dintre fortunatel I'm one of the lucky ones*

text: **Alexandra Voivozeanu**

directed by **Lorand Maxim**

Based on the interviews conducted during the fieldwork Alexandra Voivozeanu wrote the playwright for the theater performance we produced as one of the results of the project. She used true facts from different stories focusing on the common experiences and situations, creating from all that a life story of a single mother and her son.

The theater play was first performed in Zalău in november 2019, and then toured in the villages where we did the fieldwork (Hida, Marca and Carastelec), before it became part of the theater season at the Reactor Theater (independent theater) in Cluj-Napoca. The representations were followed by discussions with the public on migration, family and community.



Sinopsis: *Sunt una dintre fortunate* *I'm one of the lucky ones*

In the early 2000s, in search of a better life, a woman packs some clothes and goes to Italy, where she gets to work as a caretaker. Her seven-years-old son is left at home with his grandmother. With an intimate look, *I'm one of the lucky ones* reveals sequences from the evolution of the mother-son relationship, as well as their individual paths. The theater play is about the hundreds of thousands of Romanian children who grew up between two phones, between two packages, which blew in birthday candles on video calls. It is about their mothers who left without being able to look back, who simultaneously cared for elders in Italy and children in Romania, and who managed to find the strength to stay afloat in an extremely uncertain economic climate, both at home, as well as in the countries to which they left. It's about those who have learned to live *here* and *there*.

The Exhibition

The photo-audio exhibition *Anonimii Migrației* was opened on november 14h 2019 at the Art and History Museum of Zalău, and in 2020 will be presented in Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest.

The exhibition contains a selection of 15 photos realised by Vlad Petri, audio and printed fragments from the interviews.



What's next?

We are currently preparing for a second round of fieldwork in which we want to explore deeper these communities. This time the research team will split, each researcher will focus on a different community in which will spend a longer period. In this attempt, my focus will be the small Slovakian community from Marca Huta where I intend to spend at least one month.

For 2021, we intend to organize an international conference on labour, family and migration in the rural area and to publish a volume with studies on this subject from our fieldwork.





































