

# VISION Notes

convivial multimodal research



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## Meandering Flows: The mobility infrastructure of Romanian workers in Brandenburg

By Daniela Trifu

The following is the fictional story of an unnamed Romanian migrant worker on his way to Germany. Like many others, he relies on a network of friends and relatives, but also on a migration infrastructure including banking apps, transport companies, informal brokers, and intermediaries, but also German employers and local authorities. The story is based on a digital ethnography of Romanian Facebook groups relating to Berlin/Brandenburg, with the data being collected during April 2022 - March 2023. It illustrates issues like finding accommodation and how flexible employment-cum-housing exposes migrant workers to uncertain situations; not being able to register as a resident officially and not being aware of official ways and alternatives to do so; the harsh working conditions in agriculture and food production but not only; the care

strategies migrants employ towards themselves and others to mitigate such efforts - made possible by commercial services who promise the achievement of co-presence, status affirmation, but also aim to replace the intimacy of care for the body.

Additionally, the fictional story offers a glimpse of how flows of remittances are multi-directional, for instance reversed - Romania to Germany - to help sustain the low costs necessary for the migration goal achievements, or how flows combine with other routes, for example those of workers/ consumers from the Republic of Moldova to the Czech Republic, or those of recruiters from the UK looking for Romanian workers in Germany. This article ultimately aims to shed some light on the paths and workarounds that Romanians carve for themselves in completing their migration goals abroad.

## On the road

"Let's go then," he said to no one in particular, slamming his cap to his leg to shake off imaginary dust. He had bought it for this occasion - his first trip to Germany, to his sister's. Her family would offer him housing for the first few weeks of work, although that made him jittery, as it was hard to step on his pride. Besides, she had her own family, and he didn't want to be a fifth wheel. He'd just focus on the work and should be able to stand on his own in no time and send money home. "I'll send some home-made goodies with the neighbour," his wife reassured him, "He has a cooler trailer and will be driving packages to Germany soon. Everything should arrive in good shape. I'm sure he won't mind taking an extra package."

The man was getting worried, his ride was running late. There he was, standing in the village main street, bags in hand; soon the sun will be up, and neighbours will start moving about. He wasn't one for long goodbyes. In the distance his cousin appeared, driving an old platform. They'd pick up a car in the Czech Republic, he had explained, and deliver it to a Moldovan customer in Germany. "So, what are you going to do?" His cousin asked. "Asparagus," he replied, "my sister put in a word for me at the farm. In April they will be needing more people, she said. They have containers there and they could fit in an extra bed. It's good that I may come before bulk recruitment starts. And besides, my sister is getting a bit on the side too for bringing in someone hard-working". "And what about housing? Where can I send you a greeting card for Easter?" The cousin added, laughing. "I saw on these Facebook groups that you can get a deal for a letterbox address, plenty of Romanians who offer. Plenty of scams, too. Question is, can you trust them - that they're going to hand you in your mail for as long as you have an agreement? My sister's agency coordinator isn't allowed to register me, and besides, she said asparagus season would be over before the municipality gave us an appointment. Also," he said after a short thought, "I'm not going to bother with banks and all the like. I got myself a Revolut card- almost like a bank card, but no address needed- that should work fine via the app. It should do the trick for sending money, but just once a month, only then it's free. Do you need me to drive now?" After 18 hours, the cousin made a stop near an industrial park outside Brno and loaded the promised car, a 2000s BMW<sup>1</sup>. "Can't afford a Tesla yet, even though they make them nearby, in Grünheide. You could even work at their factory, but I hear it's not ideal, safety-wise<sup>2</sup>."

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<sup>1</sup> Romania Journal. 2023, February 22. "4 Out Of 10 Used Cars In Romania Are Imported From Germany, Research Reveals." *Society & People*. <https://www.romaniajournal.ro/society-people/4-out-of-10-used-cars-in-romania-are-imported-from-germany-research-reveals/>

<sup>2</sup> Sternberg, Jan. 2023, March 24. "Frau Ö. gegen Elon Musk." *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*.



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Another passenger joined and he got quickly filled in on the conversations and the concerns of the fresh Romanian worker. "There's a German NGO<sup>3</sup> that can help you with a letterbox address for free, they're there for Eastern European workers like us, you know. I learned this when I got kicked out on the street by the temp agency coordinators. They can fire you just like that...!" "Ah thanks, but I'm good, I don't know how all that works, I'll be fine at my sister's." The traveller said. "Suit yourself," replied the passenger; then, continuing towards the cousin, "did you see the Brits are recruiting on the Berlin-Brandenburg Facebook groups? It's like Corona times all over again!". The passenger then addressed the traveller again: "So do you know how it's done, asparagus picking?" The passenger did not wait for an answer, as he directly pulled out his phone and showed the man an instructional video in Romanian<sup>4</sup>. *What a smart-ass, does he think I was born yesterday?* The man thought to himself. *I've been working the land since I was a kid!* Undisturbed, the passenger continued talking. "How's your back? I know these effective belts that contain minerals<sup>5</sup>, tried them myself..." The passenger continued. The traveller was slowly growing tired of the talkative passenger, and his thoughts wandered along the landscape. It was his cousin who interrupted his thoughts.

<sup>3</sup> Klik e.V. n.D. "Who we are." Accessed on March 30, 2023. <https://klik-berlin.de/english/>

<sup>4</sup> Kolcsar Rares. 2017, August 11. "Film didactic pentru muncitorii sezonieri la Sparagnhel (Spargel)." *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skpptUxt3XM>

<sup>5</sup> Means of self-care intensely advertised and commercialised on the Facebook groups. See for instance: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/139517986186569/search/?q=brau%20cu%20turmalina>.

Seeing the deep frown on the traveller's face, the cousin tried to appease him. "Don't worry, you'll feel just like home! Maria will send you her home-made cozonac for Easter and besides, there are Romanian stores where you can quench your appetite for smoked ham and the like." The deep frown disappeared, and a smile gave away to the traveller's face. "I think I'd rather have the smoked ham sent over, then," he replied with a grin, "we need to save for a new annex to the house. How's your wife and the kids doing by the way?" "Fine, kids are in school, speaking German like natives. They had it hard the first year, but with some *Nachhilfeunterricht* and play dates they're comfortable. And some weekends we also meet in Potsdam for a picnic, us Romanians, and then they can speak our language. Their mother gets them books from this Romanian library, it's the best of both worlds, really." His cousin replied. "And how is she?" The traveller inquired further. "Well, you know... Working, taking care of this old lady. There are double feelings, as her own mother is far away. Once, we arranged a home surprise for her - we had this company buy her cake with candles and our photo printed on it and they filmed everything as they handed it over. You should have seen the neighbour's stare<sup>6</sup>!"

The landscape was slowly changing. Since they had left Budapest behind, the Danube was getting smaller and windier, and as they crossed it repeatedly all the way to Germany, the traveller was excited to see the thread leading home, but also upstream to their destination.

## About the author

Daniela Trifu has joined the VISION project as a Ph.D. candidate during 2022-2023. She is a University of Amsterdam Sociology graduate (International Migration and Social Cohesion MSc), with a background in European Union Studies and Political Science. From her positions as a cultural mediator and trade union organiser, she has been closely following the working and living conditions of Romanian mobile workers in the Netherlands since 2018. Her research background is with Eurofound on migration policy coordination for third country nationals. In 2022 she joined the Radboud University research project "Migrants in the Frontlines" as a qualitative researcher, investigating the impact of Covid-19 measures upheld by the Dutch government on Romanian migrants employed in the so-called essential sectors.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Home surprises' are a business model addressing mainly the Romanian diaspora, promoting a way of establishing co-presence and showing status to the dear ones at home. See for instance: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=285833440178215>.