

Hitler and White Asparagus: The Pandemic in Romania

by Lala Pop

The COVID-19 pandemic in Romania, as elsewhere, exacerbated many chronic social, political, and economic ills. The reality of millions of Romanians away in the fields, construction sites, slaughterhouses, and nursing homes of Western countries was brought to the fore. As hotels, businesses, and restaurants were entering lockdowns in March in Italy, Spain, the UK, Germany, and France, and as borders were rapidly closing, Romanian migrant-workers waited for hours at border crossings to return *home*. Many of the returnees were of Roma ethnicity, and the attention quickly turned to a familiar tune of ‘criminals, illegals, beggars, murderers, prostitutes’ coming back from Europe to ‘infest’ the nation. They were accused of returning to their ‘Gypsy’ communities where they didn’t respect the norms of the quarantine, of the lockdown, and made the infection spread from within. Visceral anti-Roma racism reared its head with even more impunity than usual. The centuries-old control, often violent, of the movements of the [brown](#) body of the Roma rehearsed a long history of oppression, mostly missing from any history textbooks.

The invisible invader needed a visible, blamable, infectable body and face.

The people, authorities, and the [media](#) ([new](#) and [old](#)) found the tangible body and face of the ‘other’ in the returning migrants and quickly in the whole Roma community. Despite the fact that the majority of Romanians do not learn in school about the Holocaust, about what happened to the Roma Romanians during WWII, many criticized Hitler in their comments for not finishing his job with the genocide of the Romani people who were now here spreading the disease by not following the quarantine rules and behaving ‘as they always do’ with impunity. Familiar insults amplified online depicting all the Roma as irresponsible, lazy, with no care for consequences or harm to others, a burden on the state. In times of fear, panic, and uncertainty, Romania’s pandemic is also one of long-festering structural inequalities, injustice, violence,

racism, and lack of opportunity, for a large number of Romanians and even more so for the Romani people who have a long history of discrimination and marginalization in this country.

As the military, gendarmerie, and the police blasted the national anthem on the empty streets of the locked-down country, [images](#) of an invasion at the borders were vividly showing Romanians returning *home* from abroad bringing the virus and their infected bodies as strains on a healthcare system they do not contribute towards. Coming home from the West, to be with family, or because they lost their jobs and livelihoods, they argued that their remittances are more contribution than of those who stay put. They [argued](#) for their right to be *home* during a global crisis and thought about their futures in a country that forced them to be for years fruit pickers, construction workers, caretakers, in the better-off economies of Western Europe.

Meanwhile, it is white [asparagus](#) season in France, Germany and [other](#) parts of Western Europe. But there's nobody to pick them. So, [Romanians](#) were called back into the fields of Germany, after the country cracked its border slightly open to allow the agricultural workers to [return](#) during the pandemic so there won't be a shortage of food. Romanians' initial pride as being considered the essential (workers) of Europe, quickly revealed them as the expandable workers of Europe. Promises of health safety, good salaries, humane working conditions, and measures to protect them from the coronavirus were kept only by few of the employers. With 14-hour workdays workers who refused to pick vegetables on Easter were kicked out with no pay and no means of returning home in a [lockdown](#).

The fancy media campaigns of #staiacasa (#stayhome) and #1suntemtoti ([#weareall1](#)) are in stark contrast with the realities of those who don't have a proper home, a way to wash their hands, and don't have the income to wait it out, such as the Roma living in communities without running water, plumbing, or electricity, with reduced and substandard access to education and [healthcare](#), or those boarding chartered planes for the white asparagus fields.

Hashtags are nice and comfortable calls to solidarity, for those who can stay home. But they do not fit or question the persistent real problems that will not go away after the pandemic, such as pervasive racism and the factors that push so many Romanians to leave their children in the care of grandparents and aunts for years while they make a living in the West. Hashtags are not enough to address the situation of the Romani people, from the four centuries of enslavement, genocide during WWII, to the current state's response of insults, discrimination, police violence, and online threats of jail and extermination.

Hashtags are part of a Romania that imagines itself ordered, rule-obeying, and in line with the 'rest of the world.' It coexists, however, with a country that still operates on and functions by routinely disobeying rules and social norms when parking, bribing a doctor before surgery, or retiring politicians millionaires after a lifetime of public service.

All the doctors of the oncology section, and the majority of its nurses, and other medical staff, in the city of Botosani, got infected with the novel coronavirus because the state failed to provide protective gear, and not because of the Roma. The police have handed out millions of Euros worth of fines to 'respectable' nationals who defied the lockdown by taking their [goldfish](#) for a walk or to those who wanted to enjoy spring with a BBQ in a [forest](#) near Bucharest. But headlines quote Commissioner [Berbeceanu](#), adviser to the Minister of Interior, saying, after clashes between police and Roma communities, "Violence will be met with violence" and there will be zero tolerance with the "rogues," referring to the Roma. Online comments take it many steps further. An employee at the international airport in Bucharest posted on Facebook a video he took of Romani travelers returning home from England, with his derogatory commentary on the background and his colleague's remark that ["they stink."](#) The comments the video gathered on different platforms invoke Ion Antonescu- the general responsible for the deportation and extermination of thousands of Roma and Jewish people in WWII, make references to the crematorium, and call the Roma in the video by the derogatory word for 'crow' ('cioara').

Accusing returning migrants and Roma for being disobedient and thus the culprits of the pandemic allows separating and absolving the 'obedient' *citizen*, entitled to healthcare and state support, from the 'other,' culpable, who brought this upon herself, or is 'genetically' incapable of order, as many arguments against the Roma are articulated. At the same time, it allows avoiding deeper questions about the root causes of inequality and discrimination. NGOs and Romani writers and intellectuals, mostly living abroad, have called out the neo-Nazi type of racism and argued for the urgency of improving living conditions in overcrowded Romani settlements where the dangers of fatal COVID-19 infection are higher, due to preexisting conditions as well as lack of water, electricity, or plumbing. But before any of this makes sense to the larger Romanian society there's the need for the bodies in the white asparagus fields and the brown bodies of the Romani to be seen as equal and as valuable as everyone else.

The pandemic is creating new spaces where change and transformation can happen. The epidemic and the response to it has made certain behaviors and issues no longer ignorable and brought them out from under the carpet where they have been accumulating for a while. Structural inequality, marginalization, discrimination, and racism have existed and manifested in Romania before the pandemic. Now there's the opportunity to address them as the society has the chance to reimagine itself and build a community where all can be one.