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'England was the last hope': An ethnographic study of duty, favours and mistrust among Romanians in London

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork between 2020-2021, this thesis explores the lives and stories of Romanians in North-West London. It mainly draws on intimate ethnographic observations from a year of living with and studying the daily lives of a Romanian family whom I call the Boians. The thesis gradually steps beyond the Boians' threshold to also draw on interviews with other Romanians in London, casework at a local charity, and participant observation at Romanian community organisations.

The ethnographic tension I document in this thesis is born out of a Janus-faced kind of Romanianness, since my participants both valorised and discounted the Romanian way of being and doing things. Fervent debates about how one should behave towards other Romanians abroad pointed to the importance of duty. Underpinned by gendered norms and labour, duty to care for family was key to my participants' experiences as most Romanians called on their families during their time in London. However, practices of reciprocity and help expanded beyond kinship boundaries to weave intricate webs of favours, reminiscent of (post)socialist informal economies. The resulting networks forged between Romanians both strengthened and frayed, underlined by a pervasive mistrust in one's co-nationals. The role of mistrust became apparent not only in Romanians' relationship with each other, but also in their relationship with the state. Illustrated in their narratives about the COVID-19 vaccine, I argue that conspiratorial thinking was a key element of my participants' political attitudes, intent on expressing their discontent with their experiences of mobility and their hopes for the future.

By using the Boians' stories and those of other Romanians in London, the main contribution of this thesis is to further anthropological understandings of migrant identity formation. I argue that by paying attention to migrants as moral actors first and foremost, we can discover their political views and use ethnography to document how these manifest in their everyday lives – whether as a set of complex moral norms shaping their relationships or as fuel for surprising electoral results.

'England was the last hope':
An ethnographic study of duty, favours and mistrust among Romanians in London

"Ultima speranță a fost Anglia": Un studiu etnografic despre datorie, cunoștințe și neîncredere între românii dintre Londra

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due acknowledgement had been made in the text. I confirm that no part of the material presented in this thesis has previously been submitted by me or any other person for a degree in their or any other institution.

Statement of copyright

Acknowledgements

For my parents,

Maria and Octavian Cîrstea,

whose care and sacrifice made this work possible.

Pentru părinţii mei,

Maria şi Octavian Cîrstea,

a căror grijă şi sacrificiu au făcut această lucrare posibilă.

Introduction

'You'll see, many people come and go in this house!', warned Camelia on my first night in the Boian household.

***

The small living room was full to the brim. Colourful helium balloons gathered in a corner of the room where many decorations, taped askew to the wall, read 'Happy birthday!'. Wearing a new white dress, one-year-old Magdalena sat transfixed on a dining chair in the middle of the room, surrounded by fifteen people. She studied a plastic tray containing a curious selection of everyday objects: three fifty-pound notes, a calculator, a Mercedes car key, a children's book, a notebook, a pencil, a hair brush and scissors, a coil of thread, a lip balm, a small bottle of perfume, and an open pocket mirror. Just ten minutes before, she had had a thumb-sized lock of hair clipped from the top of her head, from which the one-year birthday tradition borrows its name, *tăierea moțului*. Following her ceremonial haircut, the toddler needed to select three items from the tray, which would determine her future.

Holding the tray was Magdalena's godmother, Cristina, who encouraged the toddler by rattling it and moving the objects around from time to time. Cristina's two children curiously watched by her side. Anastatia and Edi, the birthday girl's older sister and brother, dutifully stood to the left of their sister, dressed in their best clothes. To the toddler's right crouched Tanti Mărioara, the baby's *moșulica* (an old term referring to the village midwife). Her husband and three sons sat around the dinner table laden with the remnants of the day's treats: plastic bottles of soda, a kitchen pot full of barbecued meats, and half-empty bottles of homemade *palincă* and shop-bought spirits. In the background, a popular Romanian TV show boomed: 'Ladies and gentlemen, let the party begin!'.

'Come on, Magdalena, *mami*, pick something!' encouraged Camelia, the toddler's mother.

'Tell them, I have everything I need, tell them!' added Cristina's husband, the godfather.

'Pick up the calculator so you know how not to spend *too much* money!' joked Marcel, the toddler's father. Camelia smirked at him, since the joke was directed at her.

Tanti Mărioara slipped another fifty-pound note to the tray, but it did not sway little Magdalena.

'The Mercedes! Yes, *mami*, I also want a new car,' chuckled Camelia.

'Are you going to be a hairdresser like *mami*?' asked a family friend as the toddler poked at the hair brush.

'Pick something up for *tati*, come on, Magdalena!' encouraged Marcel.

The ceremony took close to half an hour, as baby Magdalena struggled to choose the objects that would determine her future. The partygoers gradually returned to their seats around the cramped room, held children on their laps, or retreated outside for a smoke. Shortly after, Camelia excitedly brought out a large square pink cake, complete with sparklers and colourful candles. We all sang as Magdalena blew out the candles with help from her siblings. As we ate our cake, I was struck by the number of people gathered in the Boians' living room. Besides the families of the *moşulica* and the godparents, Camelia's uncle and two other friends also joined the celebrations with their families. Many of the attendees left after the cake cutting, since the children grew tired after the day's festivities. Magdalena fell asleep in the living room on the single bed that doubled as a sofa, intently clutching the plastic hairbrush she picked off the tray.

<p align="center">***</p>

One morning in May 2021 as we were eating breakfast, Marcel asked me with resolve: 'Ana-Maria, do you think you have any friends?'. He waved his hand dismissively at my claims that I had many friends: '*Eee*, you're still too young!'. He, on the other hand, was old enough to know that there were no such things as real friends. Marcel explained that even though he had hundreds of contacts in his phone, no one ever called to ask him how he was doing. Whenever people did reach out, it was *din interes* ('out of interest'). At this, Camelia intervened shortly: *Trebuie să ajutăm* ('We must help'). She explained that they had a 'duty to help', in order of priority, immediate family like parents and siblings, followed by more distant relatives, godparents and godparents-in-waiting (*moşulica)*, friends, and other Romanians, like the people they met at the Orthodox church down the road.

Marcel quickly dismissed Camelia's moralising by bringing up his brother, who had been a role model for Marcel from an early age. Marcel's first time abroad was when he joined his brother in Italy for a brief stint of construction work *la negru* ('on the black market'). The work had been hard, but it brought the two brothers together. Marcel later grew closer to his brother, especially when he supported the man after his wife left him. Yet, in later life, it seemed like the two brothers were in competition. Rather than supporting Marcel's business, his brother decided to rent a car for Uber driving from someone else. When he crashed that car, he called on Marcel for his help. Marcel begrudgingly loaned his brother a car and helped him fix his rental, but he never brought up his feelings of betrayal. The incident was but one example of the many kinds of help that Marcel had given – letting cars to Romanians he knew, trying to help them, and then being disappointed. This frustration was because he had 'too much trust in people', Marcel concluded. Camelia turned around and rolled her eyes with exasperation, muttering that her husband too often felt 'taken advantage of'.

<p align="center">***</p>

The significance of social networks has been well-established in migration studies due to their potential to minimise the economic, social and psychological costs of migration by providing money,

accommodation, jobs, information or emotional support to new arrivals (Boyd, 1989; Massey et al., 1998; Vertovec, 2001; Castles and Miller, 2003; Jordan and Düvell, 2003; Faist and Özveren, 2004). Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that migration represents 'a special case of the development of social networks' (Eve, 2010:1236), reliant on the ability to adapt one's social relationships to the needs of life in a new country. Early migration scholars theorised how most, but by no means all, migration flows started with 'bridgeheads' (Böcker, 1994) who brought over family members, friends and co-nationals, and soon built a veritable 'culture of migration' (Horváth, 2008). Once in their destination country, to borrow Granovetter's (1985) classical formulation, 'weak ties' sought to access resources beyond those available in their circle by befriending those who were more settled or experienced. Initial studies of American immigration signalled the importance of social networks in this respect – what Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller seminally called the 'transnational social field' (2004), while others have referred to them simply as 'networks' (Hannerz, 1996), 'transnational circuits' (Rouse, 1991) or 'transnational social spaces' (Faist, 2000). Despite these many conceptual guises, scholars agreed that migrants' social networks relied on simultaneity and continuous belonging in both countries of origin and destination, blending the two into a complicated web of relationships that spanned nation-state borders (Basch *et al.,* 1994; Glick Schiller *et al.,* 1995; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, 1999, 2017; Faist, 2000; Glick Schiller and Fouron, 2001; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). In her seminal book, Peggy Levitt described how the Dominican village she called Miraflores became a 'transnational village' (2001) through its links with Dominicans in the Boston area. Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron's well-known thesis on 'long-distance nationalism' (2001) similarly hinged on the networks of family aid and obligation bridging Haiti and New York. In countries of destination, migrants' social networks helped one another with daily challenges, while continuing to sustain the relationships in their country of origin through regular communication, remittances, gifts, and visits.

Despite the importance of migrant social networks, migration scholars also recognised the 'complex combination of solidarity and exploitation, trust and conflict within migrant and ethnic-specific networks' (Ryan *et al.,* 2015:4). Some commentators critiqued that researchers took it for granted that migrants arrived and readily slotted into networks that would provide them with housing, work or emotional support (Wierzbicki, 2004). The power of networks to entrap migrants in poorly paid jobs or to make them dependent on those who brought them over soon became apparent (Menjívar, 2000; Kelly and Lusis, 2006; Anthias, 2007; Ryan, 2011; Ryan *et al*., 2015). Benevolent helping hands could easily turn into exigent patrons, as those in positions of power could yield control over those in their networks. Ethnicity, seniority, class and gender emerged as only some of the factors that mediated migrants' access to networks and their ability to use them to generate different forms of support (Ryan *et al.,* 2015).

These insights are well-established in the literature on Romanian migration where the transnational aspect of long-term and circular migration of Romanians has been extensively explored

over the past three decades (Sandu, 2000, 2005, 2010; Bleahu, 2004; Sandu *et al.*, 2005; Anghel, 2008, 2013, 2015; Anghel and Horváth, 2009; Ban, 2012). The existing literature documents how a transnational network of kin, friends and acquaintances helped Romanians not only to cross borders, but also to find work, accommodation and friendship abroad (Bleahu, 2007; Boswell and Ciobanu, 2009; Elrick and Ciobanu, 2009; Șerban and Voicu, 2010; Anghel, 2013; Moroşanu, 2013). These networks closely adapted to the changes in migration governance that shaped Romanians' recent intra-European mobility.

After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, Romanian migration rapidly expanded within Europe and worldwide, registering the second highest annual growth rate after Syria in 2015 (UN, 2016). When the so-called 'transition' failed to keep its promises of prosperity and Europeanisation (a process I unpack in Chapter 1), many Romanians emigrated to cope with the pervasive poverty, rural-urban inequality, and lack of opportunities (Diminescu, 2009). At first, Romanians engaged in circular migration in bordering states like Hungary or followed their ethnic connections to Germany or Israel (Horváth, 2007), with some going as far as the United States (Sandu, 2005). Once Romanians could travel visa-free inside the Schengen Zone from 2002, a veritable 'culture of migration' emerged (Horváth, 2008) whereby migrant networks linked villages in Romania to destinations in Italy and Spain (Sandu, 2000, 2005, 2010; Bleahu, 2004; Boswell and Ciobanu, 2009).

Following Romania's EU accession in 2007, migration to other Western European countries, many of which required a cheap labour force, continued to increase. The UK has been a popular destination for Romanians over the past decade, following the lifting of restrictions on their labour market participation in 2014. According to 2021 population estimates, Romanians were the second largest group of EU-born residents in the UK (554,000 people) after Poles, having increased most rapidly and almost seven-fold since 2011 (Cuibus, 2023). In 2020 when I started my fieldwork, an estimated 106,000 Romanians lived in London, having more than doubled from 47,000 in 2010 (Trust for London, 2024).[1] Naturally, Romanians work across a range of sectors in the UK, including highly skilled professionals such as healthcare staff in the NHS or brokers in the City of London. However, Romanians are prevalent in so-called 'unskilled' (and certainly low-paid) work in sectors including construction, transport, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, or retail (Fernández-Reino and Brindle, 2024). For those living in London, low wages meant that they often resorted to renting rooms in shared houses with other Romanians. Similar to the Boians' home, these informal living arrangements often crammed multiple families into two- or three-bedroom terraced houses, and seldom met the legal requirements of 'multiple occupation' homes (UK Government, 2024b). Inside these homes, the

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[1] These figures may be slightly unreliable and underestimate the current number of Romanians in London. They use the discontinued ONS dataset 'Population by country of birth and nationality' which partly relied on faulty administrative data. Moreover, this estimate is based on ONS figures collected before the 2021 Census which indicated a higher proportion of Romanians in London. I discuss the Census figures in detail in the Methods section of this chapter.

networks forged between Romanians both strengthened and frayed, as many relied on their compatriots to find work, raise children, and build the lives they imagined through Westward mobility.

The stories of Camelia and Marcel Boian, my hosts and main interlocutors, fit into this theoretical and empirical picture. Their experiences of intra-European mobility, which we will come to intimately know during this thesis, relied on an intricate web of family, friends and acquaintances in Romania and the UK. When he first arrived in the UK, Marcel had lived in a house with other Romanians and a friend helped him find work in construction using another Romanian's identity. He eventually settled on Uber driving, which grew into the small taxi and car rental business he ran when I first met him. Joining him a few years later, Camelia had served as a 'bridgehead' herself for most of her siblings who had, at some point, come to work in London. She initially worked in hospitality, before falling pregnant with her first child. During my stay in their home, Camelia cared for the children and the house, studied at a local college, and provided hairdressing services out of her home. The offerings on Magdalena's tray illustrated the hopes that Camelia and Marcel, like many other Romanians, held for their lives in the UK (see Figure 1). The Boians worked hard to save money destined for their house in their native village in Romania, which they continue to build to this day. Marcel also dreamed of driving a luxury German-made car, like the Mercedes car key that Camelia encouraged her daughter to pick up. Although Magdalena eventually selected the hairbrush that implied she may become a hairdresser like her mother, Camelia held higher hopes for her children. She wanted them to pursue higher education and to enjoy the pleasures denied to her: a well-paid professional career, travel and holidays, and the kind of security and freedom that she imagined would come with life in a country like the UK (whether her children remained in the UK or not).

Figure 1: The tray prepared for Magdalena's one-year birthday celebration.

Why are Romanians (in London) otherwise?

However, there are a few differences between the Boians and the picture I sketched above by bringing together statistical figures and established findings from the migration literature. The first one is a nuance of terminology. Camelia and Marcel would hardly identify as 'migrants' or 'immigrants' since they did not intend to settle in the UK indefinitely. Like most of my interlocutors, both had worked in other Western European countries before coming to the UK, without an intention of 'settling down' there. Their mobility remained a key asset used to improve their lives, so I favour the term 'mobility' over 'migration' when describing their movement across Europe. I similarly favour 'Romanians' rather than 'Romanian (im)migrants', since my participants often debated how one should behave as a Romanian and towards other Romanians, but how one should behave as a 'migrant' seldom came up for discussion. Alongside its ethnographic relevance, this preference is also informed by recent calls to 'de-migranticize' migration research (Dahinden, 2016), moving beyond using migrant status and ethnicity as the default and most important criteria for explaining social processes. This choice is also political, since uncritically reproducing categories favoured by the state risks portraying movement across borders as an anomaly, a claim long disproved by migration researchers (de Genova, 2013; Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013). However, I continue to use the term 'migration' in this thesis when it refers to the way in which my participants were perceived and understood, for example by the British state or by academic theories. While their migrant status cannot explain all dimensions of their lives, it was often one of the main reasons behind the precarity, uncertainty and in some cases destitution I witnessed during my year in London.

Alongside these conceptual distinctions, Camelia and Marcel's stories also provide novel insights into established ideas about mobility, belonging, and resistance. By using their stories and those of other Romanians in London, the main contribution of this thesis is to further anthropological understandings of migrant identity formation and how these processes can help us understand migrants' moral and political convictions, including potential avenues of resistance. Rather than focusing on the work of dissidents and radical actors, my thesis documents a different kind of political resistance shaped by a migratory form of cultural intimacy. Michael Herzfeld seminally defined 'cultural intimacy' as 'the recognition of those aspects of an officially shared identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (2016:7 [1997]). The 'data of cultural intimacy', he contended, are the anecdotes of ethnographic accounts, the 'generic enjoyment of tweaking one's nose in highly localised contexts' (2016:16). For my participants, this 'data' revolved around a Janus-faced kind of Romanianness that they experienced during their lives in London and previous experiences of intra-European mobility. In short, how one should behave as a Romanian and towards other Romanians abroad represented a key dilemma for my participants. Throughout this thesis, I emphasise how my participants both cherished and discounted the Romanian way of doing things, for example they despised Romanians' use of connections to get by and warned of liaising with other Romanians, while at the same time relying on them at every turn.

This seeming contradiction is not new, since previous research with Romanians and other Eastern Europeans documented high levels of hostility towards co-nationals abroad. In Trandafoiu's study of online Romanian communities, this distrust corresponded to 'diasporic cannibalism' (2013:81) that manifested as in-fighting online and at in-person events. On the online forums of Romanians in Ireland studied by Macri (2011), Romanianness similarly became a 'love and hate' notion. Shared belonging rooted in Christianity, tradition and a romanticised ancestral home was quickly tarnished by the supposed selfishness and immorality of other Romanians. For Moroşanu and Fox's participants, there was 'no smoke without fire' (2013:442), hinting at the proclivity for deception and criminality of their compatriots in London. As Vicol attested in her doctoral thesis, mistrust emerged for Romanians in London against a 'background of precarity and frustrated mobility' (2019:15). For the Romanians she encountered during her transnational fieldwork in 2014, shared ethnicity became the instrument of discontent when social security was transferred onto personal connections and help from compatriots rather than the state.

Similar findings can be found in the more substantive literature on Polish migration in the UK, where expressions like 'Poles are like wolves to one another' (White, 2017) prevail in narratives about other Poles (Eade et al., 2007; Ryan et al., 2008; Pawlak, 2015; Garapich, 2016). Echoing the claims made by my participants, the Polish families studied by Anne White remained wary about 'Polish strangers' abroad (2017:185; see also Ryan, 2010), despite their reliance on other Poles to find work, school children, and solve bureaucratic matters. White's participants also decried the Polish 'national character' associated with envy or dishonesty and lamented the lack of community or solidarity among Poles. A separation emerged between Polish networks formed along the lines of shared residence, friendship or kinship and the generalised population of Polish migrants seen as unhelpful and potentially dangerous (Ryan *et al.*, 2009). Such narratives about broken trust and hostility within migrant communities are, of course, not unique to Eastern Europeans. The prevalence of self-stereotyping within migrant communities and the resulting distrust have been documented in other contexts, for example about drug trafficking among Colombians in the US (Guarnizo *et al.,* 1999) or inherent criminality of other Albanians in Italy (King and Mai, 2009).

However, stopping here may hinder our analysis. In his monograph on Poles in London, Michał Garapich argued that academics should tread cautiously for fear of reproducing negative stereotypes about migrant individualism or competition (2016). Garapich (2016) argued that academics fail to account for their complicity by taking these narratives of weakening ethnic ties and distrust at face value. Broadening the scale of analysis can help extend Garapich's comment beyond the migratory context, connecting it to the critical literature debating the place of Eastern Europe and the Balkans within the European imaginary. As highlighted in Maria Todorova's seminal thesis, the Balkans are characterised by an 'imputed ambiguity' as neither European, nor fully Oriental (2009:17 [1997]). The marginality of the Balkans therefore emerges as sharing some similarities with Western European powers, yet still needing to achieve full Europeanness through Europeanisation, democratisation and

market economy rule (Todorova, 2009). Along a similar line, the 'invention' of Eastern Europe (Wolff, 1994) as a space to be ruled by Western intellectuals, dating back to the Enlightenment, becomes a constant of life in countries like Romania. One key example was the contested volume of Romanian historian Lucian Boia (2013), entitled 'Why is Romania otherwise?' (*De ce e România altfel?*), where the reputable historian spent hundreds of pages decrying his country's backwardness, for example claiming that prominent Romanian artists simply copied the works of Western European artists. However, as Garapich warns, these academic narratives do not occur in a vacuum, but they slowly transfer and morph into people's perceptions of themselves (as I show in Chapter 1). To borrow Michał Buchowski's words, the 'mental map has morphed into social space', sowing mistrust in one's family, friends and neighbours (2006:466). In turn, these processes of mistrust influence one's relationship to the state, as the late Romanian anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu succinctly put it:

> Until we see what happens, it's best to only trust your own, a sort of *us* based on proximity, and not put too much trust in *them*: we have for a long time been the country with the lowest trust rate in state institutions in Europe. (2018:18, my translation, original emphasis).

This is where my contribution comes in, adding another dimension to these analyses of mistrust bridging micro and macro scales. My participants are seemingly no different from the migrants featured in the studies above. Despite mainly associating themselves with other Romanians, most of my interlocutors remained cautious about other compatriots. This mistrust emerged in other areas of their lives as valorising the Romanian way and distrusting other Romanians and the Romanian state occurred in tandem. Yet, these claims of mistrust are more than signs of broken ethnic solidarity. I argue that they are generative social forms in their own right, crafting Romanians into particular kinds of moral and political actors. In this thesis, I trace these processes through different social spheres: gender, kinship, morality, and encounters with the state. Rather than simply documenting broken ethnic ties or faulty migrant solidarity, I explore how my participants' concerns about Romanianness can be used to understand their moral and political views. In doing so, I aim to make four main theoretical contributions, which I set out in the section below.

Theoretical contributions

Romanianness

The first theoretical contribution of this thesis emerges out of the emic concerns of Romanianness with which my participants grappled everyday. Rather than corresponding to a clear-cut theoretical concept, Romanianness is lodged between ethnicity, nationality and neonationalism. From an analytical standpoint, I follow its ethnographic ambiguity and resist the urge to definitively place Romanianness in either of these conceptual containers. Besides its ethnographic relevance, resisting to define Romanianness is also inspired by the prominent critique of the 'ethno-focal lens' (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015:544) in migration studies. Numerous scholars have argued that researchers must avoid

limiting their research to a pre-defined ethnic or national group. Uncritically applying the 'ethnic lens' (Glick Schiller *et al.,* 2006) risks falling into 'groupism' (Brubaker, 2004) by assuming homogeneity within migrant groups and reinforcing an us-versus-them dichotomy. In a similar vein, notable interventions warned migration scholars of reproducing 'natural' national borders (de Genova, 2013) and reinforcing what Wimmer and Glick Schiller seminally called 'methodological nationalism' (2003); once the nation-state becomes the default unit of study, it risks also becoming a unit of analysis and reproducing state-centred paradigms. With this in mind, Romanianness emerges as a 'category of practice' rather than a 'category of analysis' (Brubaker, 2013) in this thesis. Romanianness surfaced in conversations with my interlocutors, but I did not seek it out during my fieldwork or, indeed, during my analysis. Rather than a front-and-centre concern, Romanianness emerges in the ethnography in this thesis as an emic concept that my participants hotly contested across different spheres of their lives, whether in discussing gender, kinship, or reciprocity. Borrowing from Brubaker and colleagues' work in the multi-ethnic city of Cluj, Romanianness could be understood as 'everyday ethnicity':

> Everyday ethnicity cannot therefore be studied as a self-subsistent domain. Ethnicized ways of experiencing and interpreting the social world can only be studied alongside a range of alternative, non-ethnicized ways of seeing and being (Brubaker et al., 2006:15).

Brubaker explains how he and his colleagues did not ask about ethnicity or nationhood, but traced how it emerged in other spheres of life as 'a perspective on the world, not a thing in the world' (2006:169). I apply a similar approach in this thesis where Romanianness serves as one aspect of the discursive tools that my participants employed to make sense of their lives abroad. For example, in Chapter 4, I investigate how the 'ordinary ethics' of helping other Romanians combined moral claims about a shared humanity with norms associated with Romanianness, in particular mistrust.

Ever since Barth's (1998 [1969]) classic theory of ethnicity, anthropologists have explained how ethnic identity is built both through self-definition and by being confronted with the identities that others ascribe to us (Eriksen and Jakoubek, 2019). In short, ethnic groups are '*created* through that very contact' with other ethnic groups (Eriksen, 2002:14, emphasis in original). For my participants, this was not necessarily the stereotypes of Romanians' innate criminality or benefit fraud reproduced in British media (Fox et al., 2012; Vicol and Allen, 2014), but in the broader imagination of being Romanian within Europe. As I briefly explained above, self-orientalising notions of Romanianness were commonplace in my participants' narratives, associated with deception and distrust, but also with an imagined ingeniousness and sociability.

Despite these bounded and homogenous ideals of Romanianness, it emerged primarily as a classed and gendered notion in my ethnography. As outlined in the expansive anthropological literature on labour and processes of dispossession (see, among others, Kasmir and Carbonella, 2008, 2014; Harvey and Krohn-Hansen, 2018; Narotzky, 2018), migrants are both subjects and active agents in the process of globalisation and capital accumulation. In short, they are 'embedded in the relations of class

while forming part of the class structure of the societies of provenance and also relocation' (Lem and Barber, 2010:3). However, my approach to class here is not an attempt to situate my participants, such as Camelia and Marcel, within fixed and specific classes in the UK or trace their (hoped) social mobility in Romania. In my understanding of Romanianness, I employ an anthropological understanding of class as 'shifting, interconnected and antagonistic social inequalities' (Kalb, 2015:14). Studies of Polish migrants to the UK, for example, emphasise the intersections of class and mobility. For example, Michał Garapich (2016) traces the division between Poles in London where the post-war 'freedom fighters' and educated Poles in professional jobs looked down on their recently arrived co-nationals who laboured in manual jobs. Similar rifts occurred in the narratives of my few interlocutors who worked professional jobs and generally distanced themselves from their co-nationals in blue-collar jobs (a process I explored in my pilot study, see Cîrstea, 2019). However, the main arena where class emerged in my ethnography and analysis was in my participants' political views related to their place within global capitalism, which I explore in Chapter 6. One of the main aims of this thesis, therefore, is to advance ideas of class within migrant groups not simply as a qualifier of their heterogeneity, but also as a basis of their political resistance. Rather than using their class-based difference as a source of 'class consciousness' *per se*, experiences of dispossession were linked with mistrust to create new political allegiances for my interlocutors.

One key interconnected dimension to class to which I also pay attention in my analysis is gender. As outlined in the 'GENS' manifesto, feminist anthropologists have long acknowledged how class emerges alongside norms of gender, as well as those of race, sexuality, and kinship (Bear *et al.*, 2015). The connections between gender and class are also well-explored in the rich literature on Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017). Social reproduction can be understood as 'an all-inclusive approach to material, life-sustaining processes' (Narotzky, 1997:1), or 'the complex activities and relations by which our life and labor [sic] are daily reconstituted' (Federici, 2020:1). One could go a step further to argue, as Sian Lazar does in her recent monograph, that social reproduction is probably the reason why most people work, 'not for the capitalist's profit but to live well, feed, educate and care for those they love' (2023:164). Despite our reliance on social reproduction, the labour behind it is often rendered invisible, within the realm of kinship, care, love or 'women's work' (Bhattacharya, 2017). This association has long been the subject of anthropological enquiry, as feminist thinkers dating back to the 1970s and 1980s sought to highlight the value of reproductive labour in the wider political economy, pointing also to the links between gendered labour and inequalities (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Rubin, 1975; Strathern, 1988).

However, even as recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic showed the interdependence of society as a whole, social reproduction continues to be undermined. As Keir Martin, Ståle Wig and Sylvia Yanagisako recently outlined (2021), the way in which certain dependencies are acknowledged, even celebrated, while others are hidden or rendered inexistent enable anthropologists to understand how social inequalities are created and reproduced:

Ascriptions of dependence are always built upon strongly gendered distinctions and practices, such as the differentiation between "wage labor" and "domestic labor," where the (often male) participant in the former practice is considered "independent" while the latter remains their "dependents." Such ascriptions rhetorically separate those who are seen to produce their own independence out of relational entanglements and those who are seen to sustain or be trapped by entanglements such as kinship (2021:5).

Kinship and family relations represented a key locale for social reproduction for my participants, infused with expectations of reciprocity and emotional attachment shown through caring practices. Care lies 'at the centre of the morality of kinship' (Pine and Haukanes, 2021:22) whereby the norms of caring for kin and the obligations involved in doing so run parallel to the responsibilities between family and state (Alber and Thelen, 2018). These entanglements of kinship emerged most clearly in my analysis and fieldwork, especially because the Boians' family practices provided me with a rich understanding of gendered norms and social reproduction. I had set out to understand labour processes primarily via paid work, but the pandemic meant that I could seldom get an ethnographic insight into these processes outside of the home. However, I had an intimate insight into processes of social reproduction within the Boian home and then later in the lives of my other participants. As I set out in Chapter 2, the provision of help I explore in this thesis has profoundly gendered roots, as the Romanian women who were my key interlocutors engaged in caring for their families, but also for other Romanians via an exchange of favours, to which I turn next.

The 'economy of favours'

A second contribution of this thesis is to the regional literature on the 'economy of favours' (Ledeneva, 1998). Often nestled under the top-down terms of 'clientelism' or 'corruption', numerous ethnographies document how Romanians rely on their social connections, often with more important or better-placed others, to get by in the face of an unreliable or faulty state, both during and after socialism. Known as the humorous trinity of *pile, cunoștințe și relații*,[2] the use of connections provided an ever-present backdrop for ethnographies of life in socialist Romania (Kideckel, 1993; Kligman and Verdery, 2011). For example, exploring the 'culture of shortage' in a village in the 1980s, Liviu Chelcea (2002) documented how villagers engaged in informal commerce and trade using an underground network of acquaintances, friends, neighbours, and kin. These connections bridged the gap between the shortages imposed by the regime and the necessities of everyday life (see Chapter 1 for a brief summary of Romanian socialism).

This reliance on informal connections continued after 1989, documented as a key feature of the so-called 'transition' to market democracy (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; see Chapter 1 for a discussion of (post)socialism and the 'transition'). Relying on connections and brokerage by local elites

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[2] This syntagm originates from a popular joke told during the Communist regime where *Pile, Cunoștințe și Relații* (loosely translated as connections, acquaintances, and relations) coincided with the acronym for the Romanian Communist Party, PCR (*Partidul Comunist Român*).

underpinned processes of rural property restitution (Mungiu-Pippidi and Althabe, 2002; Verdery, 2003; Dorondel, 2005, 2016), urban gentrification (Chelcea, 2006), private house restitution (Chelcea, 2003, 2021), and community-based forests (Vasile, 2000, 2008; Măntescu and Vasile, 2009). Informal connections also played a key role in changing labour regimes as state-owned institutions were privatised and welfare systems were eroded by successive neoliberal governments. Networks of mutual assistance emerged to support those facing sudden joblessness and destitution, whether in the case of ex-miners in the Jiu Valley (Kideckel, 2008) or the homeless of Bucharest (O'Neill, 2017). The importance of connections and their consolidation through bribes shone through in accounts of informal economies, such as open-air markets where sellers learned the ropes of incipient capitalism while also paying bribes and protection fees to market administrators (Constantin, 2005; Mateescu and Chelcea, 2005). The exchange of bribes also thrived in less 'informal' settings, setting firm roots in Romania's healthcare system where informal exchanges of money and goods such as flowers, coffee, or perfume marked interactions between patients, doctors, and nurses (Stan, 2012).

Naturally, there is nothing intrinsically Romanian about the use of informal connections to get by, and these processes permeate other ethnographies of (post)socialist Eurasia - whether as *blat* in Russia (Ledeneva, 1996, 1998, 2008, 2009), *znajomosci* in Poland (Dunn, 2004), *veze/stele* in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Brković, 2017b), veering in Mongolia (Humphrey, 2012) or *guanxi* in China (Smart, 1993; Kipnis, 1997; Ong, 1999; Yan, 2003). As Ledeneva argued in her extensive writing on Russia, using informal connections to get by cannot simply be equated with corruption or clientelism. She defines *blat* as 'the use of personal networks for obtaining goods and services in short supply and for circumventing formal procedures' (2009:257). This web of networks in turn gives rise to what she seminally labelled the 'economy of favours' (1998:3), a blurry economic sphere combining elements of market exchange with those of everyday reciprocity characteristic of friendship or kinship. During socialism, this economy of favours upheld the Soviet regime which relied heavily on informal exchange to compensate for its rigidity and shortages. But while *blat* was necessary to obtain foodstuff and other consumer goods during socialism, after the fall of the Iron Curtain it mediated access to healthcare, education or employment. The use of informal connections to get by while yearning for a 'normal life' (Jansen, 2015) where such social entitlements would be easily accessible features in ethnographies of other postsocialist countries, such as Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Brković, 2017b; Jansen et al., 2017). For example, Čarna Brković writes about using connections (*veze/stele*) to access welfare entitlements in a border town in Bosnia and Herzegovina as 'sociality with a purpose' (2017:7). Rather than a mere by-product of failed postsocialist and postwar statehood, she explains that residents use favours to make meaning and relate to each other: 'Favors, thus, persist not just because the official 'system' does not work but because they shape who people are socially' (Brković, 2017b:73). The reliance on informal connections to get by of course expands beyond the Eurasian postsocialist literature, whether it is using connections to the navigate the bureaucracy of a state-owned sugar factory

in Eastern Anatolia (Alexander, 2002) or to hustle and make do by young men in Nairobi's markets (Thieme, 2017).

My contribution in this thesis builds on this expansive literature on the 'economy of favours' (Ledeneva, 1998) by examining what happens to these connections in the context of mobility and migration. My participants often referred to using connections and corruption as separate, yet highly interlinked fields. Corruption emerged as part of the reasons and hopes to leave and return to Romania in my interlocutors' narratives, at times also linked to self-orientalising notions of Romanianness (see Chapter 1). Despite these narratives, the Romanians I worked with significantly relied on the exchange of favours with their co-nationals in London, whether to find accommodation, work or build relationships of friendship and kinship (see Chapters 3 and 4). These interactions at times involved elements of market exchange, as per Ledeneva's original thesis (1998), as some Romanians were happy to pay their co-nationals for help with their papers (*acte*) or to find work. This kind of help in fact grew into an economic niche where numerous Romanians who had some bureaucratic, digital and language skills posed as 'lawyers' or 'accountants', primarily operating on social media and online chatting platforms like WhatsApp. Many Romanians relied on their expensive services to access basic, and often free, government services, such as paying tax online or securing their immigration status. Drawing on my experience as a caseworker where I had an insight into how these 'accountants' muddled people's fiscal records, I was outraged at first. However, most of my participants were happy to pay a co-national for these services, and most of the people I knew in London had an 'accountant' who helped them submit annual tax returns, for example. What mattered more to my participants boiled down to the social and moral aspects of the many helping hands they received. In particular, mistrust plagued my participants' interactions with one another and led them to warn me against trusting Romanians, despite relying on other Romanians at every turn.

Exploring these interactions helped me depart from the expansive literature on favours as pseudo-economic or informal transactions, and instead think about their social and moral qualities. In a recent edited volume, Henig and Makovicky describe how favours became somewhat of a catch-all term in ethnographies of mostly postsocialist Eurasia, encompassing a range of oft illicit practices from barter to corruption:

> For scholars of socialist and post-socialist Eurasia, in short, the 'favour' has long been academic shorthand for those actions which appear to mix instrumental and affective relations, goal-oriented and gift exchanges, and 'formal' and 'informal' institutional ties (2017:4).

They however argue that anthropologists must move away from this functionalist focus on exchange that turns favours into distorted acts on the outskirts of the economy. Instead, they conceptualise favours as 'social acts first and foremost' that can have profound economic outcomes without being wholeheartedly explained by a transactional analysis (Henig and Makovicky, 2017:4). Favours therefore become more than an instrumental use of connections for survival. They are defined by a

specific kind of sociality that combines not only the helper and the helped, but also their understanding of the world around them – their claims and experiences of how the world is (survival) and how it should be (ethics). This link between favours and social personhood is of course not entirely novel. In her monograph of a Polish baby food factory acquired by an American corporation, Elizabeth Dunn (2004) explains how the use of *znajomosci* (connections) lends itself to the crafting of social personhood on the shop floor. Borrowing Strathern's (1988) concept of the 'dividual', she argues that *znajomosci* rendered workers as socially embedded, and allowed employees to resist corporate discipline, navigate inequalities in the firm, and assert their value in the face of ongoing managerialist reforms. In his ethnography of the Chinese village of Xiajia, Yan (2003) similarly outlines how the social connections amounting to *guanxi* became tightly linked to *renqing* ethics, the moral norms used by villagers to regulate behaviours and to judge and create personhood.

What recent contributions add to the conceptualisation of favours is a link between social personhood and morality, turning favours into a kind of ethical reflection required for the crafting of personhood. Writing comparatively about higher education practices in Russia and Mongolia, Caroline Humphrey (2012) explained how favours, or 'veering', provided her interlocutors with an opportunity to carve themselves into a particular kind of person. Providing favours in higher education confirmed one's ingenuity and social standing, turning favours into 'an independent mode of acting that is initiatory, extra, ethical, and gratuitous, rather than being a simple expression of a previous relationship' (Humphrey, 2012:23). This inherent gratuitousness and how people choose the recipients of favours is key to how social relations are maintained, and can be missed out of analyses focused solely on the mechanisms behind an 'economy of favours' (Ledeneva, 1998). Drawing on her decades of research in Poland, Frances Pine similarly attested to how the so-called grey economy 'has its own kind of morality that links it to the family and household, relations of trust, and extended sociality' (2015:25). This moral dimension helps us think of the grey economy as more than corruption and illicit activities. People use favours in a highly relational way, embedded within local ideologies where they may not only be necessary, but also moral and positive. Using connections becomes corrupt and illicit when they are seen to be only for individual gain, but instead the practices amounting to the grey economy are in fact moral acts, located within relationships to family and community. My contribution echoes and extends these theoretical propositions, showing how favours mobilised norms of kinship, Romanianness and a set of 'ordinary ethics' (see Chapters 3 and 4). It is this moral quality of favours to which I turn next.

Between moral economy and moralities

The third contribution of this thesis feeds into the growing literature on ethics, morality and moral economy in social anthropology. Questions of morality and ethics have received renewed attention over the past two decades (Mattingly and Throop, 2018), as anthropologists sought to move beyond the 'suffering subject' in order to interrogate how people seek the good in their lives (Robbins, 2013:447).

This move away from what Sherry Ortner called 'dark anthropology' (2016) gave rise to an expansive scholarship, whether under the guise of 'moral anthropology' (Zigon, 2007; Fassin, 2012b), a Foucauldian approach to virtue ethics (Faubion, 2011), or 'an anthropology of ethics and freedom' (Laidlaw, 2002, 2014). Other contributors launched calls to re-work the concept of moral economy to better understand the conflicting moralities of contemporary capitalism (Palomera and Vetta, 2016; Makovicky et al., 2024). Without aiming to provide an extensive review of this scholarship (see, among others, Fassin, 2009; Hann, 2010; Palomera and Vetta, 2016; Mattingly and Throop, 2018), I use this section to unpack how my work takes inspiration from and builds on this broad range of theorical perspectives on ethics, morality and moral economy.

For my purposes here, two main strands emerge in the anthropological literature on moralities. Firstly, moral economy approaches provide an insight into systems of (re)production, often under the guise of 'informal' practices outside or on the margins of the market. One key aim of these contributions has been to emphasise the importance of values in understanding economic processes and challenge economistic views (Hann, 2010). The second strand departs from the original focus on production, instead emphasising the adjective 'moral' over the noun 'economy' and therefore proposing that moral economy be understood as 'the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space' (Fassin, 2009:37). I found both approaches useful to unpack the actions and narratives of the Romanians I worked with in London. I therefore echo Valerio Simoni's (2016) provocation to not privilege a single understanding of morality, but to use the tension between moral economy and 'moral anthropology' (Zigon, 2007; Fassin, 2012b) to analyse our interlocutors' views and, in the process, reap the advantages of both perspectives while also acknowledging their limitations. Writing about Cuban migrants in Barcelona, Simoni argued that we can prioritise our participants' insights into both 'morality' and the 'economy' by:

> paying attention to how processes of 'economization' and of 'moralization' operate, and raising the key related questions of *what counts* as economic and moral in a given social, cultural, and political economic situation (2016:470, emphasis in original).

Classic perspectives on moral economy provide important lessons for understanding what counts as economic and moral in my participants' eyes. In his essay proposing the concept of moral economy, historian E.P. Thompson (1971) refuted the causal link between economic scarcity and the food riots of the English poor, proposing that the material realities of hunger are accompanied by a consideration of unmet social norms and obligations as the catalyst of the revolts. Thompson (1971) proposed that the complex motivations behind the riots could offer an insight into the historical transition from a feudal system of paternalistic relationships to the 'free market' that primarily benefited the profit-seeking (and immoral) bourgeoisie. Political theorist James Scott later picked up the concept of moral economy in his work with peasants in Burma and Vietnam in the late 20th century to unpack how a system of values underlined their experiences of resistance and production (1976). Focusing on

the everyday conditions behind larger processes of free-market expansion and colonial state-building, Scott theorised 'the moral economy of the subsistence ethic' (1976:4) to distance peasants from the *Homo Economicus* of neoclassical economics, a rational actor intent on maximising resources (Piore, 1979). Instead, peasants remained risk-averse in order to safeguard a basic level of subsistence, with different expectations about entitlements getting caught up in this process. I build on these insights in my analysis, since the mobility of Romanians in London was not simply caused by economic scarcity in post-socialist Romania, but also relied on a contested set of norms and obligations, for example the different hopes Romanians attached to Westward mobility, as I show in Chapter 1. Throughout the thesis, I apply a similar perspective about social reproduction to showcase how the exchange of favours among Romanians enabled economic production for my participants, but not without giving rise to a contested set of norms about the process of lending a hand to one's compatriots (see Chapters 3 and 4).

More recent contributions to the literature on moral economy extend these useful insights and apply them to the context of contemporary capitalism. To borrow Susana Narotzky's formulation, the 'moral' aspect emerges in the current junction of capitalism that 'seems to have shattered a certain moral arrangement of capitalism based, first, on relatively Keynesian distribution of wealth policies, and, second, on the belief that the process sustained by the capitalist objective of expanded accumulation was part of a process of political "democratic" inclusion and relative social "convergence"' (2015:179). These insights are useful to place my interlocutors' burgeoning moral claims within the historical conjecture of their making. The Romanians I worked with were grappling with the tension between the hopes attached to their mobility – such as wealth, independence or Europeanisation – and the failings of contemporary capitalism in both Romania and the UK that slowly undid these expectations (see Chapter 1). At the same time, new cultural constructs came to the fore. For example, Romanianness was both celebrated and discounted during their time in London, inspiring political views premised on discontent and an imagined future back in the homeland (with neonationalist undertones) (see Chapter 6).

Capital and class remain key to understanding 'the ambiguous logics and values that guide and sustain livelihood practices, by looking at the dynamic fields of struggle around the boundaries of what is good and acceptable, their power hierarchies and the political projects they might inform' (Palomera and Vetta, 2016:415). This theoretical approach has inspired my analysis in this thesis as I seek to portray how my participants made sense of the interdependencies required to sustain their livelihoods in London, primarily along the lines of kinship (Chapter 3) and Romanianness (Chapter 4). The boundaries between genuine help and self-interest were blurred in these two social realms, as my participants struggled to make sense of how one should behave as both helper and helped. Their struggle, however, remained anchored in the relations between capital, class and state. The exchange of favours and reliance on a Janus-faced notion of Romanianness enabled my participants to remain economically active in London, contributing to primitive accumulation with little access to entitlements such as welfare, since this notion was relegated to the contested webs of favours that were mobilised

whenever my participants fell ill or became unemployed. During my fieldwork, I observed the resulting inequalities from this transfer of responsibility from the state to personal connections and networks. For example, as I explain in Chapter 5, the most destitute Romanians fell through the gaps of state support during the COVID-19 pandemic and relied on their co-nationals and the limited provisioning of community associations to make ends meet.

However, stopping the analysis here would retain a conceptual blind spot. As Makovicky and colleagues have recently highlighted (2024), analyses of morality and moral economy to date have frequently highlighted the immorality or amorality of capitalist processes, proposing a range of alternatives amounting to a more 'human' economy (see also Hann, 2010). These analyses, however valiant in highlighting the inequalities and power imbalances of contemporary capitalism, have emerged to the detriment of better understanding the 'actually existing (rather than desirable or ideal) moral orders and agencies in late capitalism' (Makovicky et al., 2024:13). To paraphrase Didier Fassin (2009), one needs to understand moral economy as it is, not as we would like it to be. I am partly guilty of this in Chapter 5 where I outline how favours hold the potential for resistance, for example by valorising certain kinds of mobility and labour that are routinely undervalued under contemporary capitalism. However, I echo the warning against circumscribing moral economy to individuals engaged in class struggle or contesting capital accumulation since, as Chris Hann explained, 'even the reactionary right is entitled to its moral economy' (2010:195). In this thesis, I showcase how social ties and favours exchanged between Romanians were not inherently positive as a sign of ethnic or national solidarity, but instead also relied on ambivalence and mistrust, and were linked to a growing political view I call conspiratorial thinking (explored in Chapter 6).

It is here that the anthropological scholarship on morality and ethics helped me push my analysis beyond concepts of ethnic solidarity or of 'informal' practices of reproduction. To showcase how my participants combined claims of kinship and Romanianness with general considerations of how to be a good person, I use the concept of 'ordinary ethics' (see Chapter 4). In Lambek's (2010) reading, the ordinary character of ethics is derived from its very inseparability from the human condition and its tacit manifestation in everyday life. In short, ethics are the very substance of being human, made and remade everyday, realised in practice rather than existing as an abstract set of norms or knowledge. In a similar vein, Veena Das proposed 'a descent into the ordinary' to better understand ethics, refuting the idea that ethical moments arrive at extraordinary junctures or encounters:

> the notions of ethics and morality on the register of the ordinary are more like threads woven into the weave of life rather than notions that stand out and call attention to themselves through dramatic enactments and heroic struggles of good versus evil (Das, 2012:134).

It is this blurry distinction between good and evil unfolding in the mundane which I explore in my analysis. However, I do so cautiously since the concept of 'ordinary ethics' has received ample critique by anthropologists writing about morality (Zigon, 2007, 2014, 2021; Clarke, 2014; Robbins, 2016;

Laidlaw and Mair, 2019). Critics have argued that anthropologists have always concerned themselves with everyday life, and therefore 'ordinary ethics' may not amount to anything new (Clarke, 2014) or may simply serve as a shorthand for culture, society, or power (Zigon, 2007). As Heywood recently argued, the 'ordinary' emerges as an 'ethical achievement' (2022:93) through the actions and narratives of our interlocutors, rather than simply being the normal state of affairs. In emphasising 'the everyday', anthropologists want to point to how social phenomena are actually lived 'in all of their messy, contingent, complex, and distinct reality, to bring them "down" into the granularity of life, and *away* from the realms of formal, general categories' (Heywood, 2022:97). However, 'the everyday' and the 'ordinary' are themselves general categories suggesting that there is some universal 'everyday life'. Heywood argues that instead of isolating the 'ordinary' or the 'everyday', we need to see what kinds of phenomena our interlocutors refer to as ordinary and how they create this sense of ordinariness. It is in this spirit that I use the concept of 'ordinary ethics' in order to understand the moral considerations employed by my participants, especially regarding their daily practices of helping other Romanians, whether kin or not. In Chapter 4, I unpack my participants' moral claims of 'help them because you were also helped' (to borrow the words of Manu, see Chapter 4) to understand the ordinary character of helping other Romanians and link these moral ideas to claims about Romanianness and deservingness. Noticing these ordinary claims about deservingness led me to recognise how my participants' claims and counter-claims of helping one another were closely linked to their encounters with the state, especially through the sphere of bureaucracy, to which I turn next.

Bureaucracy, the state and deservingness

The fourth and final intended contribution of this thesis is to the anthropological literature about encounters with the state, primarily through the sphere of bureaucracy. Despite its importance in political anthropology, bureaucracy continues to be a 'promiscuous concept' (Lea, 2021:61) full of contradictions, both theoretical and empirical. Comparing bureaucracy to fantasy literature, David Graeber outlined 'a certain abstract ideal of how bureaucratic systems should work, not the way they actually do' (2015:145): value-free, rule-bound neutrality and indifference; regularity and predictability of procedures; mechanical nature of bureaucratic operations; and the principle of transparency. In part, these traits are derived from Max Weber's (1978) ideal type of bureaucratic authority characterised by centralisation, rationality, and the depersonalisation and disenchantment of bureaucrats. Despite being repeatedly disproved ethnographically (see, among others, Hoag, 2011; Gupta, 2012; Hull, 2012), these ideals about bureaucracy continue to impact how our participants make sense of bureaucracy. Some argue that anthropologists are 'also bureau-citizens that they desire the ideal form suggested through their critique' (Lea, 2021:66). However, as Graeber (2015) continued, bureaucracies are rarely neutral and instead favour privileged groups, placing incredible power in the hands of those administering them. Despite these inconsistencies, to borrow the words of Michael Herzfeld, bureaucracy continues to be

'one of those phenomena people only notice when it appears to violate its own alleged ideals, usually those concerning a person's place in the social scheme of things' (1993:3).

As much as it refers to infrastructures and objects (Hull, 2012) like offices or documents, bureaucracy also represents 'a central site for the forging of the personhood, affective life and sometimes the radical potential of contemporary citizens' (Bear and Mathur, 2015:19). It is this facet of bureaucracy to which I contribute in this thesis. I do not write about the 'paper state' itself, that is the 'production, circulation, reading, and the filing of the correct documents' (Mathur, 2015:3), but instead trace its effects on the relationships between Romanians and on the way that they understand, imagine and relate to the state. As Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur explained, the legitimacy of bureaucracy rests on its existence 'for the public good' (2015:21) – not only about roads, clean air or free education, but about 'those desirable ideals that are considered universally beneficial for everyone and are the rationale for radical changes to bureaucratic organizations' (2015:21). In my participants' eyes, the state – whether in Romania or the UK – seldom acts 'for the public good', leaving them to use favours and connections to manipulate bureaucratic structures and make a living.

For my participants, their migrant status in the eyes of the British state made bureaucracy – especially one's pursuit of *acte* (papers) – an ever-present concern. As the migration literature extensively attests, migrants are often embroiled in 'paper trails' (Horton and Heyman, 2020) to legitimise their status at a time of increasingly restrictive migration governance and control. Yet, as Madeleine Reeves wrote about Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow, 'documents are never entirely knowable and never completely transparent' (2013:509). By unpacking how her participants used their 'clean fake' passports, Reeves (2013) showcased the performativity of the state that opens up spaces of possibility which could be used by migrants, despite also generating suspicion and prejudice towards non-Russians. In this thesis, I follow a similar line of ethnographic enquiry when it comes to bureaucracy and focus on its affordances, tracing how the connections and practices it requires impacted how my participants related to the state. To borrow the apt words of Michael Herzfeld, I focus on the ways in which ordinary people conceptualised bureaucratic relations:

> The symbolic roots of Western bureaucracy are not to be sought, in the first instance, in the official forms of bureaucracy itself, although significant traces may be discovered there. They subsist above all in popular reactions to bureaucracy - in the ways in which *ordinary people actually manage and conceptualize bureaucratic relations* (1993:8, my emphasis).

As I show in Chapter 4, Romanians in London routinely relied on other Romanians for bureaucratic help – whether to secure a National Insurance Number, to sign up their children for nursery or to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme.[3] This reliance on others was in part due to the illegibility of the state, in this case in terms of procedure, language and digitalisation. As Veena Das wrote, the

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[3] The EU Settlement Scheme was introduced by the Home Office in 2019 to administer and secure the immigration status of EU citizens living in the UK before Brexit.

illegibility of the state is not an exception, but a key part of how rules and laws are created and implemented (2007). A web of connections – whether kinship, friendship or mere acquaintances – were mobilised as my interlocutors attempted to make state bureaucracy in the UK intelligible. These practices, however, were also rooted in the role of favours to navigate encounters with the state in Romania, as I explored earlier in this chapter. Faced with the unintelligible bureaucracy of life in the UK, my participants employed a conceptualisation of bureaucracy rooted in favours and mistrust, both in one another and in the abilities of the state.

However, the story I tell does not stop here, but continues by exploring a specific kind of bureaucracy that was contingent on the context of my fieldwork – COVID-19 pandemic governance. Bureaucracy took the form of COVID-19 tests, NHS forms and SMS alerts, and vaccination records captured in smartphone apps and QR codes. Once again, I focus on how my participants made sense of these bureaucratic forms, rather than analysing them directly. By following my participants' conspiratorial narratives about these bureaucratic forms and about the COVID-19 vaccine in particular, I connect their experiences of bureaucracy with their views on the state and their political opinions. In Chapter 6, I borrow Matthew Carey's concept of 'bureaucratic imagination' (2017) to showcase how conspiracies about the COVID-19 vaccine spoke volumes about how my interlocutors related to the state, both in the UK and in Romania. Comparing his fieldwork in Ukraine and the High Atlas of Morocco, Carey explained how conspiracies mirror and mimic the bureaucratic forms present in his interlocutors lives:

> the enemy is imagined as bureaucratic in shape (i.e. modular, distributed and arborescent), in quality (depersonalized and rational) and finally in intention: its goals are secular, frequently opaque and imply the constant expansion of its authority and remit (Vine and Carey, 2017:54).

The conspiracy theories exchanged by my participants shared this bureaucratic format. These theories were part of a wider conspiratorial thinking they applied in their interactions with both the Romanian and British state. Here, I borrow from the concept of 'affective states' recently proposed by Madeleine Reeves and Mateusz Laszczkowski who wrote that 'in the proliferation of ethnographic studies of bureaucratic practice, ideological production, or organized violence, the emotional or affective intensities elicited by the state often risk being obscured' (2017:3). Ambivalence plays a key role in understanding affect about the state since it is 'a state that causes anxiety to be sure, but also a state that deserves contempt' (Laszczkowski and Reeves, 2017:9).

Contempt towards the state, but also towards the wider operating hierarchies within global capitalism, are key to understanding my participants' political views. In Chapter 6, I apply and extend the concept of the 'politics of resentment' (*politică a resentimentului*) proposed by the late Romanian anthropologists Vintilă Mihăilescu (2018) to make sense of my participants' conspiratorial thinking and political critiques of their place within global capitalism. For Mihăilescu, recent Romanian populism was driven by the resentment felt by a large part of the population, rooted in the failures of the post-

socialist transformation, the impossibility to secure social mobility, and the growing rural-urban divide. His proposition naturally mirrors interventions from other Central and Eastern European countries, where neonationalist movements emerged as a response to and against the failed promises of post-socialist modernisation and Europeanisation, for example as 'village fascism' for Slovaks (Buzalka, 2021) or radicalism in Hungary (Szombati, 2018). During my fieldwork, the politics of resentment crystallised into the support of many Romanians abroad, including my participants, for a new far-right party called the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) in the Romanian Parliamentary elections of 2020. This electoral support was surprising since Romanian migrants usually voted for liberal, pro-democracy and pro-EU candidates. AUR's manifesto and policies ran contrary to these previous patterns, mobilising ideas of a white Romanian nationhood, national sovereignty from Brussels, and a return to 'traditional' Christian values seen in opposition to the cosmopolitan identity politics of Western countries. Yet, if one were to tell the story differently, this political change could be understood as a resentment towards the continued inequalities and failed promises of global capitalism, within its conjecture in Eastern Europe and its manifestation as intra-European mobility for my participants. As Don Kalb recently explained:

> As individual hopes for middle classness and the expected proofs of individual merit were being denied amid the celebratory public bonfire of 'the middle classes', 'democracy' and 'civil society' that neoliberalism was, the devalued groups of workers we were researching responded by embracing collectivist ethnonational calls for deservingness (2022:113).

Ideas of (un)deservingness are key to understanding my participants' resentment and surprising newfound electoral support. As Steinzer and Tosić recently argued, (un)deservingness has become a 'crucial category of contemporary politics' (2022:1), especially crucial to studies of migration and mobility whereby states build ever-more complex mechanisms to differentiate between 'fake' and 'real' refugees deserving of humanitarian help or asylum, and between 'desirable' highly-skilled expats and 'undesirable' labour migrants. Deservingness, however, is situated at 'the flip side of rights', relying not on formal juridical terms but on 'a vernacular moral register that is situationally specific and context dependent' (Willen and Cook, 2022:71). The resulting process of moral weighting is first and foremost relational, since one's claims of deservingness rely on both the sense of one's own deservingness and its links to those whose deservingness is being questioned. In this thesis, I map out this vernacular moral register for my participants, entangled as it is at first in claims of gender (Chapter 2), kinship (Chapter 3), Romanianness (Chapter 4), and finally, in the politics of difference (Chapter 6). By analysing my participants' conspiratorial thinking, I connect this vernacular moral register to their critique of wider inequalities in contemporary capitalism, manifested partly by their electoral support of far-right parties. Before offering a more detailed summary of each chapter, I explain my methodology and provide a summary of the year I spent in London.

Methods

The 'topos' of the field

Since Romanians[4] in the UK are most likely to work in construction, transport, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, or retail, London represented a suitable fieldsite for my research due to prevalence of these industries (Fernández-Reino and Brindle, 2024). My fieldsite was located in North-West London, specifically in the boroughs of Brent, Harrow and Barnet where many Romanians live and work (see Figure 2). According to the 2021 Census, Harrow had the highest proportion of Romanian residents in London, with Romanians making up 8.07% of Harrow's residents (21,082 people), 5.2% of Brent's residents (17,722 people), and 3.4% of Barnet's residents (13,430 people) (ONS, 2024).[5]
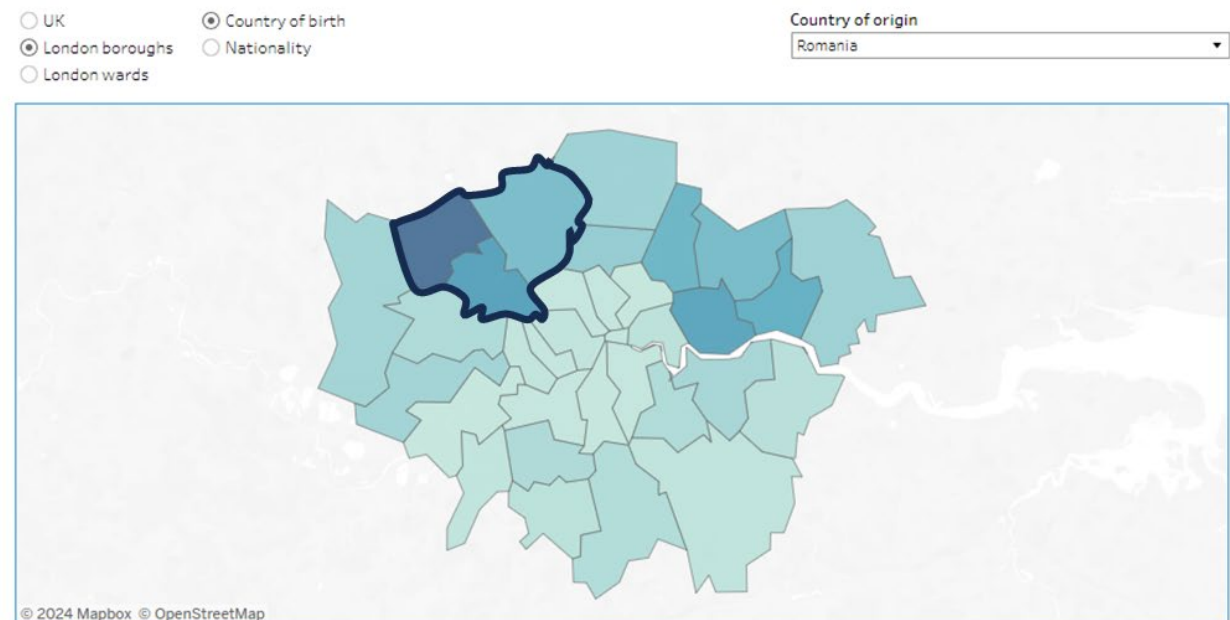
Figure 2: Distribution of Romanians in London boroughs. Figure created by The Migration Observatory using Census 2021 data. I have highlighted the boroughs of Brent, Harrow, and Barnet.

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[4] This Migration Observatory briefing uses data from the Annual Population Survey where findings about Romanians and Bulgarians are combined under the category EU-2, so these industries refer to both nationalities rather than exclusively to Romanians. Despite this limitation, data from the 2021 Census confirms that the highest concentration of Romanians in the UK is in London (ONS, 2024).

[5] While another significant Romanian population lives in East London (for example, Romanians make nearly 5% of residents in the borough of Newham), this population was largely inaccessible due to lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions. Once restrictions were eased, the cost and time required to travel between West and East London and the limited fieldwork time left meant I could not extend my research into this other part of London.

Alongside these figures, the city emerges as a suitable site for migration research since it is 'where the meeting of cultural politics – discourses, policies, and institutions – are most clearly contested by, or reproduced through, people's actual meanings, perspectives and practices' (Vertovec, 2011:250). The 'city as context' (Brettell, 2003:166) provides more than an abstract location for migration studies, but remains contingent on local, regional and global forces that shape how migrants live and are perceived in specific cities (see also Brettell, 2000). Rooted in its rich history of migration and numerous foreign-born residents, London provided a cosmopolitan setting for my research. Most of my participants commented on how they did not experience 'racism' in London, which they imagined to be more prevalent outside of the capital, and some even enjoyed the diverse cultures they found in the city. However, as Pnina Werbner aptly explained, cosmopolitanism 'surfaces in pockets' (2015:571) and cannot be readily ascribed to an entire city or its residents. She differentiated between 'descriptive' cosmopolitanism, such as living in a diverse neighbourhood, and 'real' cosmopolitanism which requires cooperation towards a shared political vision. For my participants, 'real' cosmopolitanism did emerge in pockets, for example in charities where Romanians worked with other Londoners to build community (such as the foodbank I describe in Chapter 5) or the leisure activities of middle-class Romanians working in professional jobs. However, most of the Romanians I met generally sought out the company and help of other Romanians, a contested process I unpack in this thesis.

Simply attributing my participants to an isolated ethnic enclave or a 'hyperghetto' (Wacquant, 1994) would, however, misrepresent their experiences. The Romanians I worked with could be instead conceptualised as what Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar referred to as 'migrants as scale makers' (2011:12) as they worked, raised their families and contributed to economic, social and political life across London. As Ruth Mandel explained about a Berlin kebab shop owned by her Turkish participant, even such as an 'ethnic enclave' business is more than an isolated representation of the Turkish community. The kebab shop is where 'an entire transnational world unfolds' (Mandel, 2008:312) since the owner needed to acquire basic German language skills, accountancy and bureaucratic abilities to navigate starting a business, and skills to market his food to Germans and non-Turks. Similarly, even the Romanians I met who mostly worked and socialised with other Romanians should be seen 'less as ghettoised victims than creative players whose skills might be transferred across boundaries – geographic, political, or cultural' (Mandel, 2008:312). With this in mind, London emerges not as a simple geographical 'topos', nor as a homogenous cosmopolitan setting, but as a space for 'social relationships that happen in and across territory' (Glick Schiller & Çaglar, 2011:63).

Applying these insights to my time in London makes visible a patchwork of institutions, charities, churches and businesses frequented by Romanians. I discovered this dispersed network during my Master's fieldwork, which was a pilot project for this thesis (see Figure 3).[6] For five weeks in the

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[6] My Master's thesis entitled *'Hai cu maneaua, hai cu sarmaua': Competing values of labour migration amongst Romanians in London* was completed as part of the '1+3' ESRC pathway for doctoral training.

spring of 2019, I conducted interviews and participant observation in Central London and in Brent, Harrow and Barnet. In the heart of London, the Romanian Embassy and Consulate dealt with diplomatic and bureaucratic matters and sponsored the Romanian Cultural Institute where highbrow music, art and folklore were celebrated. Numerous small charities and social enterprises operated across London to help Romanians access welfare, secure their immigration status or engage in cultural activities. A well-established network of Christian churches, both Orthodox and Protestant (mainly Pentecostal), attracted Romanians across London and represented one of the most popular places for socialisation due to the parishioners' otherwise limited leisure time. Romanian-run businesses such as corner shops, beauty parlours or restaurants filled the high-streets of boroughs where Romanians lived. Rather than working as a well-oiled community, my pilot study found that Romanians in London drew on contested norms at the intersections of class, integration, hard work, and ethnicity to articulate where they belonged (Cîrstea, 2019). Their efforts to fit the archetype of the 'good migrant' gave rise to new inequalities between Romanians in London. Overall, my pilot study showed me how the 'field' emerges as more than 'an object to be explained, but a contingent window into complexity' (Candea, 2007:179). Building on these insights, I planned to return to North-West London for my doctoral fieldwork in the summer of 2020. My plans were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which loomed large during my fieldwork between September 2020 and September 2021.

Figure 3: Photographs from my pilot fieldwork in 2019. Top-left: Two Romanian businesses on a Barnet high-street. Top-right: A Romanian community event in a park in Harrow. Bottom-left: The Romanian Cultural Institute in Belgrave Square, Central London. Middle: An information session for Romanian charities on post-Brexit immigration control. Bottom-right: A traditional Romanian blouse ('ie') celebration at the Romanian Embassy in Central London.

A 'hybrid' approach to (pandemic) fieldwork

Having started my PhD in the autumn of 2019, this thesis was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I start with a short summary of the COVID-19 pandemic, before explaining its impact on my planned fieldwork. When the World Health Organisation declared the Coronavirus a pandemic on 11 March 2020, the UK government held back on imposing regulations to control the spread of the virus. On 16 March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson asked the public to stop 'non-essential contact' with others (UK Government, 2020). A week later, on 23 March 2020, Johnson announced the UK's first lockdown ordering people to stay at home and closing some businesses (Full Fact, 2020). The initial hesitance in restricting mobility and a malfunctioning testing scheme came at great cost, with the UK suffering the highest excess death rate in Europe (Reuters, 2020). While the summer saw a decrease of cases and the relaxing of regulations, the autumn brought with it the much dreaded second wave of the pandemic. A second, month-long national lockdown followed in November 2020 to manage the surge in infection numbers. By January 2021, the number of daily deaths surpassed those of the first wave, making it the deadliest month in the pandemic (McIntyre *et al.,* 2021). This increase led to a third national lockdown announced on 4 January 2021 on a rolling basis until the vaccine could be administered to the majority of the population. A phased exit from lockdown began on 8 March 2021, with the government publishing a four-step 'roadmap out of lockdown' (Brown and Kirk-Wade, 2021). After a four-week delay to reach the fourth and last step of the plan, the Government removed most restrictions in England on 19 July 2021. Further public health measures and travel restrictions were later introduced in December 2021 once the Omicron variant was detected (UK Government, 2022a).

Due to start fieldwork in the summer of 2020, this thesis is based on a so-called 'hybrid' approach to ethnographic fieldwork. I received my ethical approval in June 2020, which included plans to move to London if restrictions were relaxed as well as an online-only research plan consisting of video-call interviews and online participant observation. Once COVID-19 restrictions eased in the summer of 2020, I moved into the shared house of a Romanian family, whom I call the Boian family, in the London borough of Barnet. I initially contacted my Master's participants to find a room in a shared house, the only affordable accommodation option in London. Camelia, a Romanian woman in her late twenties whom I had interviewed in 2019, offered me a room in the house she shared with her husband, Marcel, their three children, and her younger brother. Once I moved in, I explained my research and the Boians agreed that I could study their everyday lives for my doctoral fieldwork. I often reminded them of this decision, in an effort to secure ongoing informed consent. My anxieties were generally met with well-meaning jokes and reassurances. For example, Camelia and Marcel would mock me for typing notes on my phone after an interesting conversation or they would step in as interviewers themselves when I explained my research to their visitors. I supplemented participant observation in the Boian home with online and in-person interviews with other Romanians and participant observation at community events and organisations once COVID-19 restrictions allowed it. To gain an overview of the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on Romanians' lives, I worked as a

caseworker at a local employment rights charity called the Work Rights Centre (WoRC), a process I explain in greater detail below.

During my first months of fieldwork and the second and third lockdowns, life in the Boian household represented my key ethnographic material (see Figure 4). Because lockdowns amounted to nearly half of my fieldwork (between November 2020 to March 2021), many of my ethnographic chapters rely on my observations in the Boian home where I spent most of my days in Camelia's company, as we cleaned, cooked, cared for children and received visitors. I accompanied Camelia to the shops, the nearby Romanian church, the playground and on short day trips. When COVID-19 restrictions were in place, I avoided accompanying the Boians to indoor places outside of our shared home, such as visits to their family members in London, to avoid the risk of spreading COVID-19. However, when guests came to the Boian household, I often met and spoke to them, since they consented to being in our home and the limited space in the shared house made it unfeasible to avoid guests. These everyday ethical decisions were contingent on the situation, adding further complexity to the dichotomy between ethics dictated by institutional frameworks and ethical concerns operating 'in the field' (Sleeboom-Faulkner *et al.*, 2017). Once pandemic restrictions allowed socialisation in the spring and summer 2021, I started meeting participants in person and volunteered at charities and events organised by Romanians locally. Due to funding constraints[7], I finished my fieldwork in September 2021, just as all COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.
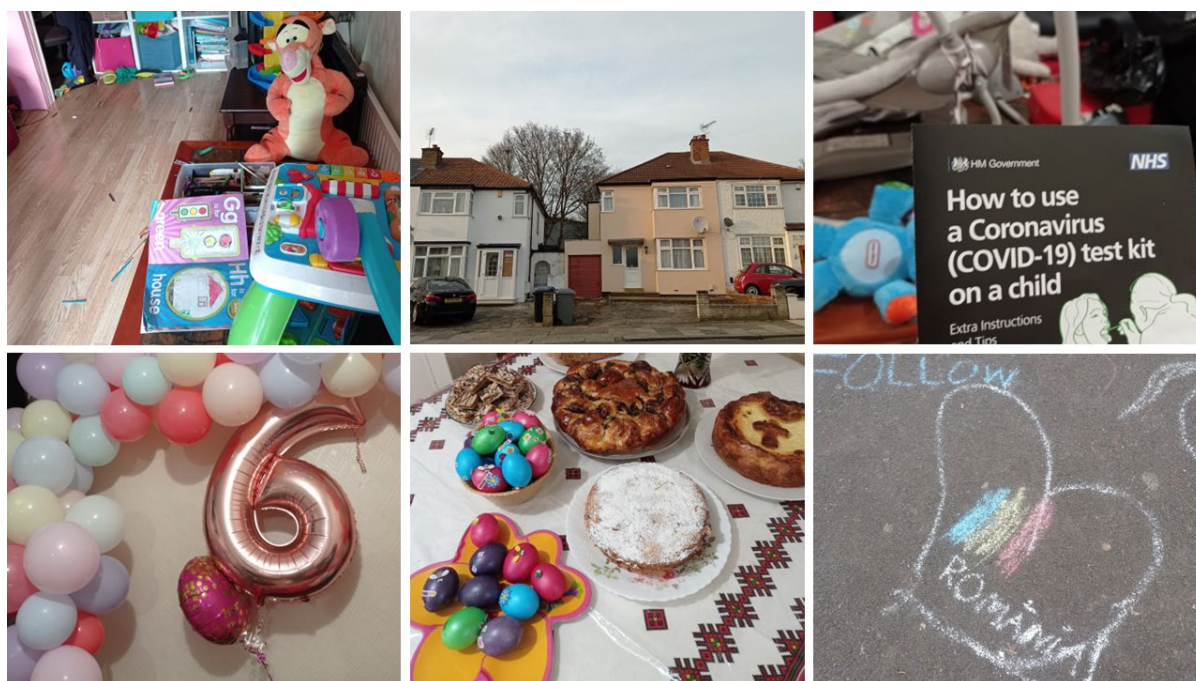
Figure 4: Photographs from my life in the Boian household. Top-left: toys in our shared living room. Top-centre: A semi-terraced house in North-West London similar to the Boians' house. Top-right: A Government leaflet on how to use a COVID-19 test kit on a child. Bottom-left: Balloons for the Boians' eldest birthday celebrations. Bottom-centre: Easter food prepared by Camelia and myself. Bottom-right: Children's chalk drawings in the local playground.

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[7] I received a one-month funded extension to account for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on my doctorate, so I could not prolong fieldwork beyond September 2021.

Besides allowing me to study their everyday lives, Camelia and Marcel also helped me find new participants for my research. They introduced me to their friends and family members in London, some of whom agreed to be my interlocutors. My participants became a mixture of the Boians' family and friends, my previous Master's participants and their acquaintances, and new participants I met at community organisations or while volunteering, for example at the foodbank I describe in Chapter 5. The aim of my fieldwork, like most ethnographic research, was not to purposefully build a sample that could yield generalisable results. However, some limitations remain and impact the social processes I describe in this thesis. Rooted in my positionality as a young woman and my limited local mobility due to pandemic restrictions, I built more relationships with Romanian women than men. As I got to know the women better, I also learned more about their husbands or boyfriends, some of whom agreed to give me separate interviews. Some of the most 'vulnerable' Romanians I met in my caseworker role are notably absent from my research participants. None of my interlocutors were experiencing homelessness or human trafficking. Although these experiences would have been highly insightful, I decided against seeking out such participants. Not only would studying these 'vulnerable' Romanians require a different methodology, but accessing them during the pandemic proved challenging. Many of the Romanians sleeping rough were housed in emergency housing during the lockdowns, while some returned to Romania at the start of the pandemic (Udișteanu, 2020). A significant population of these 'vulnerable' Romanians are Roma people, explored in a growing and separate literature on their migration (Ruegg *et al.,* 2006; Friedman, 2007a; Woodcock, 2007; Hepworth, 2012; Mihăilescu and Matei, 2014; Popa, 2017; Vrăbiescu, 2017; Humphris, 2018; Pontrandolfo, 2018; Vrăbiescu and Kalir, 2018; Yıldız and De Genova, 2018; Dorobanțu and Gheorghe, 2019). None of my participants identified as Roma and most of my interlocutors called on well-worn, racist stereotypes in their narratives of Romanian Romas (despite often working or living with Roma people at some point during their time abroad). As such, I considered it inappropriate to simply latch the experiences of Romanian Romas onto the experiences of the white Romanians I knew, but their absent voices nonetheless remain a limitation of this thesis.

(Re)telling life stories

To complement participant observation in and outside of the Boian home, I relied on the life stories of nearly forty Romanians living in North-West London. With a few exceptions, my participants engaged in so-called 'low-skilled' work in transport, hospitality, retail, construction, and domestic work. Most of them were in their thirties or early forties, and a majority had young children. They came from both rural and urban places in Romania, with most of them having spent and reminisced about their childhood in a village. Most of my participants had completed secondary education and some had university degrees (but they were 'underemployed' in fields outside of their training in London). Depending on my interlocutors' preferences, I used an audio-recorder or took notes of our conversations. Where recordings were available, I included translated, direct quotes in the text of this thesis. During

lockdowns, I spoke to my participants outside of the Boian home using Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, since they were already familiar with these platforms and used them to communicate with family and friends. I preferred video-call interviews over phone ones wherever possible to take advantage of the ability to visually ascertain participants' reactions and embodied responses (Hanna, 2012; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Hanna and Mwale, 2017).

Conducting interviews online came with a set of ethical challenges since online interactions blur the public-private boundary (Pink *et al.*, 2016), for example because video-call interviews required participants to find a suitable space for our conversation. The limited household space available during the pandemic and the competing caring responsibilities faced by Romanian women exacerbated this process. To mediate this, I remained flexible and rescheduled appointments wherever necessary, allowing participants to select a time and place where they could comfortably speak about their experiences. Sat in my bedroom in the Boian house, the online interviews connected me to a variety of intimate places, from a woman's kitchen as she was cleaning fish to the pristine car of a Romanian man driving for Uber (see Figure 5). Protecting my own privacy online required planning and curating my Facebook profile to decide which aspects of my identity I would share with my participants online (Hine, 2015). I curated my existing Facebook profile rather than creating a new one altogether to avoid appearing as a blank slate. Although I later used this profile to post calls for participants on Facebook groups for Romanians in London, I was unsuccessful in sourcing participants in this way. Most of the interviews I did and relationships I built started from connections and favours called in by Camelia, Marcel or other participants.
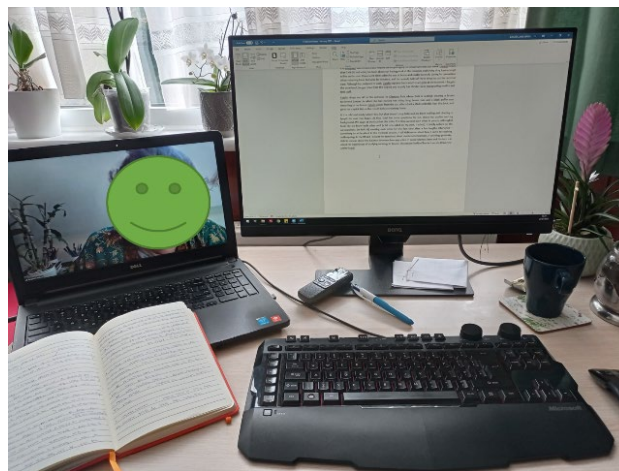
Figure 5: Setting used for online interviews from my bedroom in the Boian home.

During life stories interviews, I asked my participants about their upbringing and life in Romania, their experiences of mobility across Europe and their hopes for the future. For many of them, interviews soon turned into storytelling. Our conversations stretched over several meetings and grew more unstructured, contingent on my participants' everyday lives, the 'critical events' (Das, 1995) we had already discussed or the social and historical context framing our interactions. For example, I mostly

conducted interviews about the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccine in January 2021, since most of my participants were intensely speculating about the uncertain future posed by the introduction of the vaccine. These discussions form the basis of my final ethnographic chapter, Chapter 6. The main storytellers in this thesis remain Camelia and Marcel, whose stories I sometimes listened to during sit-down interviews (which Camelia likened to a religious confession when Marcel recounted his life to me over a couple of hours one evening) but mostly through everyday storytelling. Camelia had a penchant for sharing stories about her life as we cooked or cleaned, many of which helped me elucidate the topics I set out to explore in this thesis. My heavy reliance on Camelia's stories in some chapters led me to consider my reliance on life stories as a whole, since they are a common tool in both anthropology (Mintz, 1974; Crapanzano, 1980; Bruner, 1988; Behar, 1993) and migration studies (Eastmond, 2007; Rogaly, 2015; Lems, 2018).

As Heath Cabot explains in her work with refugees in Greece, life interviews play a significant role in asylum decisions as the 'bureaucratic penchant for producing and assessing information becomes tightly entwined with the "art" of storytelling' (2013:454). I discovered this blend of bureaucracy and storytelling in my casework when I helped Romanians apply for benefits or secure their post-Brexit immigration status. My approach to storytelling was not intended to mirror such state-centred processes, but to offer my interlocutors an opportunity to retell stories of their upbringing, mobility and hopes for the future. During interviews, I learned to actively fight the detective-like skills I honed during casework where I used a similar interview format to establish useful 'facts' in order to craft a bureaucratic footprint for my clients. The contested role of 'facts' in life history approaches has long been interrogated by anthropologists, who sought to distinguish between the events of one's life and the story through which they are recounted (Crapanzano, 1980; Bruner, 1988; Wikan, 1995). My approach, however, goes beyond this distinction between 'life as lived and life as told' (Lamb, 2001:16). My conversations with Romanians were not intended to simply discover the 'facts' of their lives and their mobility across Europe. I aimed to focus on the generative power of storytelling as 'a mode of social action, a creative act of self making and culture making, through the telling of words' (Lamb, 2001:20). In short, I used life stories to make sense of how my participants made meaning – both about themselves and about the world around them.

In other words, I followed Michael Jackson's call to focus on storytelling rather than stories in order to emphasise the *process* of meaning-making over the finished product of stories (2002; 2013). As he set out in *The Politics of Storytelling* and later in *Lifeworlds* (borrowing from Hannah Arendt), the ambition to match stories to reality has its roots in the Western ideas of individualism and fascination with a lead protagonist's actions in stories, over the realisation that we are not the authors in our own stories but that the story comes into being within a vast web of human relationships. This relational aspect of storytelling is key to my approach since the stories which Camelia shared with me, for example, amounted to more than stories about herself. She situated herself in network of relationships in both London and Romania, which in turn spoke about the values, norms and social processes

amounting to different facets of 'culture making', to return to Sarah Lamb's phrase (2001:20), from kinship to Romanianness.

As Annika Lems wrote in the introduction to her monograph about (dis)emplacement for Somalis in Australia, this thesis is therefore similarly 'anchored in the power of storytelling' (2018:5). Lems explained her approach of focusing on the lifeworlds of two individuals through what she calls 'storying':

> Storying, the means through which we bring our inner world out and take the outer world in, has the ability to form, transform and change our experiences of things. It is through storying that we overcome our separateness, that we work towards common ground and that we rework reality (2018:5).

Inspired by Lems' mission to push the constructed nature of stories 'into the academic spotlight' (2018:43), my use of life stories showcases my participants' roles as storytellers and encourages the reader to notice the significant characters or ideas that emerge in the stories crafted by Romanians about their mobility across Europe and their lives in London – from the inescapable conman to the caring roles assumed by women like Camelia.

Writing up my interlocutors' stories, however, came with significant concerns about representation. As Ruth Behar explains in her monograph on the *historias* of Esperanza, writing up transforms the ethnographer 'from a listener into a storyteller' (1993:15). Using life stories requires anthropologists to mediate between what Behar earlier called the 'three voices' – 'the native voice, the personal 'I was there' voice, and the authoritative voice of the ethnographer' (1990:224). In this thesis, I endeavoured to balance these voices by providing detailed ethnographic vignettes where both the 'native voice' and my 'personal voice' emerge and remain contingent on the social situation I describe. The third authoritative voice, however, brought a significant concern about the violence of representation and the risk that the narrative of ethnography 'speaks past, rather than to' the concerns of my interlocutors (Behar, 1990:226). In this thesis, finding this third voice involved a painful dance between two potential risks of representation. On the one hand, the stories Camelia shared with me are representative of the concerns of other Romanian women (and men), as I discovered through comparing and analysing other life stories during my fieldwork. Camelia makes for a good 'case study' of Romanian women in London – she came to London to 'follow' her husband, she was mainly employed in low-paid work before falling pregnant, she has young children whom she is trying to raise in both Romania and the UK, and she is ambitiously pursuing education and work in the UK to better her and her children's lives. On the other hand, the power of stories rests in their ability as a tool 'working against generalisations' (Abu-Lughod, 1993:13), reliant on the social and historical context of their making. Camelia is more than a 'case study' of a Romanian woman in London. Her experiences and hopes for the future are reliant on the socio-economic context of her life and on the intricate web of relationships she painstakingly weaves across nation-state borders. It is this dance between the two risks of representation that I struggled with in this thesis. When writing, I aimed to provide a contextual

scaffolding for the encounters and stories I describe, such as retelling my participants' life stories before describing a meaningful conversation, careful not to simply write a 'talking heads' ethnography (Forsey, 2010:560). I also ran my incipient ideas by Camelia and Marcel through conversations in person and later over the phone. I remain indebted to my closest interlocutor-turned-friend in London, Georgeta, who helped me debate my preliminary conclusions during long walks across North London. While I do not pretend to have elucidated these risks of representation, they remain an important concern that informed my methodology and epistemology, especially regarding ethical decision and my positionality.

'Positioned selves' and ethical decisions

Storytelling is highly dependent on its relational nature, as a social interaction between the teller and her audience (Lems, 2018). Within this relationship, my identity and role as a young Romanian woman significantly impacted the stories participants shared with me. Conducting research with other Romanians did not automatically place me 'at home' (Jackson, 1987; Strathern, 1987; Hastrup, 1996), but remained contingent on my identity and on the relationships I was able to build in London. At first, my positionality yielded a degree of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld, 2016) as I shared my interlocutors' language, jokes, and cultural references. My first-hand experience of migration also granted me insight into the social and bureaucratic mechanisms involved in Romanians' lives, such as video-calling elderly relatives or renewing passports abroad. However, my choice to move to the impoverished outskirts of London for a year showcased how 'a spell in Academia will leave its middle-class imprint on anybody' (Löfgren, 1987:91). At a time when many felt pulled back to Romania, I made the opposite choice of moving to a shared house with other Romanians in London. While this choice presented significant challenges as the pandemic progressed, I remained privileged in my mobility. As I grew anxious about the pandemic and being away from my family and friends, I discussed these feelings to build rapport with participants, and to analytically unpack some of the very interdependencies tested by the pandemic on which I reflect in this thesis.

Rather than a one-sided concept, positionality emerged as a relational and continuous concern during my fieldwork. To borrow Bob Simpson's memorable phrase, 'you don't do fieldwork, fieldwork does you' (2014). Comparing his experiences of research in Sri Lanka twenty years apart, Simpson attests to how the power relations in which the ethnographer becomes implicated in the field, as well as their identity and personal circumstances, impact their research and writing. With this in mind, I use this section to unpack the many 'positioned selves' I occupied during my fieldwork. This turn of phrase is inspired by Beverly Mullings' argument that researchers ought to find 'positional spaces' (1999:340) that go beyond the insider-outside binary in order to account for the dynamism of positionalities during fieldwork. In her study of Jamaican managers and workers in the information processing industry, Mullings found that she needed to engage in 'a constant shifting of the multiple axes upon which my

identity rested' to secure interviews and build rapport (1999:341). In an exercise to tease out the dynamism of positionalities, I have artificially isolated three 'positioned selves' that remained intertwined during and after my fieldwork: the (gendered) housemate-researcher, the researcher-caseworker, and the researcher-volunteer. Exploring these 'positioned selves' represents a key step in recognising how the findings of this thesis are not only 'partial truths' (Clifford and Marcus, 1986:6) but more importantly 'positioned truths' (Abu-Lughod, 1991:469). Reflecting on these three 'positioned selves' also involves reflecting on the ethical concerns they each entailed. Rather than a strict bureaucratic checklist as per institutional frameworks, I approached ethics as 'relational ethics' (Ellis, 2007:10) since they were rooted in and dependent on the relationships I built with my participants. My choice not to separate ethics into a sub-section of my methodology aims to showcase this contingent and relational nature. Therefore, I dwell on the ethical choices I made in my brief description of the three 'positioned selves' I occupied during and after fieldwork.

The Boian household – the (gendered) housemate-researcher

A month into my stay in the Boian household, I started my day by cleaning the downstairs of the house after cleaning my room on the same floor. I often cleaned communal areas, which Camelia saw as one of my redeeming qualities as a sub-tenant. Lifting and rearranging small shoes and toys, I vacuumed the cramped landing. I then scrubbed the tiles in the small bathroom outside my room, which was used by the entire household. After dragging the old vacuum cleaner to the living room, I started picking toys off the laminate floor. Marcel unexpectedly arrived home with a potential customer, a Romanian man whom he hoped would hire a car from him. Once the men started talking, I slipped away and left the vacuum cleaner in a corner of the living room, intending to finish the cleaning after I returned home from a meeting with a potential participant. When I returned home, the vacuum was in the same place and Marcel asked me if I was finished with it. I apologetically explained that I needed to rush off for an appointment for my PhD and could not finish the task, leaving it out to continue when I returned. Suddenly, Marcel started apologising and vacuuming the living room himself. He diligently fished toys from under the sofa, folded the blankets, and vacuumed the entire room. Later that evening, Camelia thanked me for cleaning up. When I explained that Marcel cleaned the living room, she burst out laughing and refused to believe me. From the opposite corner of the room, Marcel pretended not to hear our discussion and did not confirm the events, instead busying himself with his phone.

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Nowhere was my positionality more evident and complicated than in my relationships with the Boians, shaping even the birthday gifts I received during my fieldwork (see Figure 6). The scene above illustrates how my education and class status impacted how the Boians related to me, during the only instance I ever saw Marcel clean the house. When reminded of my role as a PhD student, Marcel started vacuuming the living room himself, despite the fact that he often left the cleaning of the house to Camelia. A possible explanation of his uncharacteristic response is that Marcel perceived the housework to be incompatible with my role as a student. Over the year I spent in their household, Marcel grew more comfortable with me and did not contest my need to pitch in for cleaning later down the line. Once we became more acquainted, my role as a young, unmarried Romanian woman seemingly exceeded my student identity. My Romanianness was often the subject of jokes and debates, being inherently linked to my identity as a young, unmarried woman. On one occasion, I returned home from the Romanian shop and laughed at the fact that the teller greeted me in English. Camelia did not share my amusement, and told me sheepishly that it was probably because of how I dressed and the fact that I did not wear much make-up: 'Romanian women take more care of themselves, Ana.'

Figure 6: A personalised mug I received from the Boians for my birthday. The cartoon of the young woman on the mug holds a book, flanked by another book to the left and a notebook and pens to the right.

During my time in the Boian household, our different class identities continued to impact our relationship. One day in the spring of 2021, Camelia and I were cooking a rather pungent dish for Easter so I wore my worst clothes and wrapped a scarf around my hair to prevent it from smelling. When some of Camelia's acquaintances called in for a surprise visit, they saw me in my tattered clothes and headscarf and asked Camelia if she 'got herself a house girl', referring to how some Romanian families bring young women from Romania to work as live-in nannies and cleaners. Camelia was mortified by

this comment and loudly reprimanded the women, explaining that I was the 'student' who lived with them.

Despite these classed differences, my relationship with the Boians remained in flux, with power imbalances unsettling norms of vulnerability often ascribed to participants, especially in migration research (Malkki, 1992; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Turner, 2019). As I illustrate in more detail in Chapter 3, the Boians sometimes used their seniority and power as head-tenants to undermine my concerns, for example about COVID-19 infection. As per the short example above, I would usually do the lion's share of cleaning since I knew that Camelia valued this trait in a sub-tenant and she grew to rely on my work to balance her multiple commitments. She and Marcel would also often give me advice about my life choices, such as not going to church with them every Sunday or choosing a British rather than Romanian partner. My relationship with Camelia was strongest and complicated all these power imbalances. She cared for me deeply and acted as an older sister at times. She cut my hair for free, made me tea when I was working from home, and called me if I did not return home by nightfall. Our roles reversed when I helped Camelia with her college assignments and she turned into a deferential student. My complicated relationship with the Boians could easily fill tens of pages in this thesis. I have woven it into the narratives and events in my ethnographic chapters, but limit my reflections to the above for now, in order to explore my other significant 'positioned self' gained through my collaboration with a local charity, the Work Rights Centre.

The Work Rights Centre – the researcher-caseworker

During my pilot study, I started a collaboration with the Work Rights Centre (WoRC), a charity based in Brent which helps 'migrants and disadvantaged Britons access employment justice and improve their social mobility' (Work Rights Centre, 2024a). Before and during my fieldwork, around half of the charity's service users were Romanian[8], as were many of the trustees, employees and volunteers. In March 2020, I started preparing for fieldwork and joined WoRC as a volunteer helping with case studies and translation. Once in London, I joined the service provision team and provided casework for Romanians for two days a week. Prior to starting my fieldwork, I had agreed with WoRC that my casework would not constitute 'data'. My plan was to use my casework to gain a basic understanding of employment problems faced by Romanians in London and to invite service users for interviews once their cases were closed.

However, the realities of fieldwork and the inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and post-Brexit immigration controls significantly altered my plans. During my year of part-time casework at the Work Rights Centre, I closed only a handful of 'cases'. Most service users returned,

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[8] Since my fieldwork, the client profile of the Work Rights Centre has changed as the organisation grew and targeted their support following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In 2023, Romanians made up 15% of service users (Work Rights Centre, 2024b).

week after week, requiring more advice, bureaucratic guidance, and support. While I first imagined I would provide help with employment disputes, I found myself advising Romanians on benefits (such as Universal Credit), housing, government pandemic support and applications to the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS). The few employment disputes I advised on were prolonged by pandemic closures, and the most I could do was call the Court or Tribunal for updates. Besides the exponential growth and range of support I provided, casework also stretched outside of the bureaucratic frameworks I had imagined beforehand. Due to pandemic restrictions, I provided advice mainly through WhatsApp and my WoRC smartphone shone bright every day with tens of messages from Romanians across and even outside London. Between their messages to family and friends, service users texted me with blurry pictures of important documents, such as passports, and shared access to their online benefits or tax accounts with me over the phone. For the most vulnerable beneficiaries who did not have smartphones, I was only ever a voice on the phone.[9] These changing circumstances made me decide against inviting any of the beneficiaries I met at WoRC to participate in my research. Given their dependence on my help every week, it would hardly be possible to ask them to separate my role as caseworker from that of researcher. I would also struggle to navigate this distinction myself since I already knew intimate details of their lives as part of my casework. How would I separate what I knew for benefits applications from what beneficiaries told me during interviews? Casework during the pandemic crossed many boundaries, and I decided that it would be irresponsible to create another blurry boundary.

On a practical and analytical level, my role at WoRC provided many advantages for my fieldwork. In terms of analysis, for example, reflecting on my own practices and role at WoRC helped me discover the bureaucratic aspect of favours and their link to the state, which I explore in Chapters 5 and 6. The practical knowledge I gained on employment rights, benefits and EUSS applications helped me ask the right questions during fieldwork. For example, when my participants hinted at a useful connection helping with their 'grant', I knew that this related to the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme on which many Romanians in self-employed work – whether construction, cleaning or Uber driving – relied during the lockdowns. This bureaucratic knowledge also allowed me to build reciprocal relationships where I could help those who needed it, but outside of the boundaries of the charity. For example, I encouraged and helped Simina and her fiancée Mihai to apply for Universal Credit when she was let go from her job unexpectedly during a lockdown. By that point, I had already met the couple individually and together on a few occasions, so our relationship did not risk becoming unbalanced by my bureaucratic favour. Lastly, my position at WoRC offered me credibility in my relationships with other Romanian charities and community groups who invited me to their events once COVID-19 restrictions allowed it: game nights with other people who worked or volunteered in charities,

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[9] This power imbalance in such relationships was so striking that when I eventually met some of these 'vulnerable' Romanians at the foodbank I describe in Chapter 5, they did not recognise me even after I introduced myself. Most beneficiaries at WoRC simply called me 'Miss Ana-Maria' and referred to me as either an 'accountant' or 'lawyer'.

volunteering at a Romanian Saturday school, cleaning up local parks with other Romanians or going for meals with advisers working in other charities. Most significantly, my participant observation at the foodbank which I describe in Chapter 5 was born out of signposting Romanians to the organisation during my days of casework.

<u>The foodbank – the researcher-volunteer</u>

Once COVID-19 restrictions lifted, I started volunteering at a local foodbank for one day a week for three months, helping run the service for a couple of weeks when the staff went to Romania for their summer holidays. Because of my casework experience, my duties were usually bureaucratic as I checked in the beneficiaries, helped them fill in forms or surveys, and offered limited bureaucratic advice. I also helped unload and pack food and clean the foodbank space, which meant I got to know the other volunteers well. I therefore decided to only invite the foodbank volunteers to participate in my research, since we could build rapport and I could explain my research during our volunteering together. I decided against including in-depth details about the Romanians who used the foodbank, since many of them were the 'vulnerable' clients I assisted at WoRC. Moreover, my bureaucratic duties at the foodbank, although not as extensive as my role at WoRC, mirrored some of the same power imbalances that made me reconsider inviting beneficiaries to participate in my research. As such, I mainly draw on the stories of other volunteers at the foodbank in this thesis, and only include details about beneficiaries where they participated in foodbank events rather than in the general service provision.

Thesis outline

The chapters in this thesis unfold chronologically, aiming to open up the world of my interlocutors to the reader in a way that mirrors the course of my fieldwork. The first two chapters are based on my in-depth observations of the Boian family, later introducing the narratives of other Romanians and recounting events outside of Camelia and Marcel's home. As the thesis progresses, the topics addressed in each chapters follow this broadening of focus, starting with gendered labour and kinship and later exploring the topics of Romanianness, bureaucracy and the state.

The first chapter explores the hopes my participants attached to their Westward mobility, bridging the (post)socialist past, the mobile present, and the imagined future return to Romania (Chapter 1). After laying out the historical and political context of my participants' lives, my first ethnographic chapter documents the social connections woven by Romanian women as they navigated life in London (Chapter 2). The thesis then turns to how kinship served as the backbone of these social ties, as most Romanians called on their families during their time in London (Chapter 3). However, practices of reciprocity also expanded outside of kinship boundaries, to weave intricate webs of favours used to source employment, navigate bureaucratic tasks, and seek support when unemployed or unwell (Chapter 4). These webs of favours did not run in parallel to either bureaucracy or encounters with the state. In particular, favours and reciprocity were vital to how my participants engaged with bureaucratic

structures and navigated life in London. For the Romanians I worked with, these legal processes were also underlined by their own reckonings about the duty to help each other which in turn gave rise to contested norms of (un)deservingness to counter formal citizenship norms (Chapter 4). Charities and community organisations also used this seemingly informal model of reciprocity and deservingness to provide legal advice and support to Romanians who slipped through the safety net provided by the British state during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chapter 5). Despite the availability of such support, most of my participants remained sceptical of bureaucratic processes associated with the state. This was most apparent in their conspiratorial thinking about the COVID-19 vaccine, which served as an illustration of wider political attitudes towards the state (Chapter 6). By exploring these narratives, my thesis ends on a discussion of the arising far-right sentiments in present-day Europe and how these manifest for Romanians on the move.

Chapter 1 – Westward mobility as (failed) hope: Situating Romanians' reasons and hope(s) for migration

Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the discussions in the rest of the thesis, starting from the manifold hopes that Romanians attach to their Westward mobility. It teases out three distinct, yet intertwined temporalities: the (post)socialist past, the hyper-mobile present and the imagined future return to the homeland. These different temporalities highlight how my participants held high hopes for their mobility – of Europeanness/modernisation, independence and progress – which were slowly fraying and becoming undone during their time in London. Covering different spaces and temporalities, this first chapter locates my participants' lives within the historical, political and socio-economic context of hyper-mobility from a postsocialist country and traces their hopes for a better future, albeit one that may not match the anthropologist's expectations.

Chapter 2 – 'It's about her being a modern woman, independent!': Romanian women balancing gender, duty and work

As the first ethnographic chapter, Chapter 2 uses Camelia's experiences to unpack the gendered norms and experiences of Romanian women who were my key interlocutors. I purposefully start with Romanian women's experiences to establish the gendered foundations of the processes I explore in the rest of the thesis. Although usually absent from migrants' life histories and the relevant literature, most of the acts of caring for family or helping other Romanians relied on women's labour within and outside the home. This chapter shows how Romanian women were at the centre of these processes as they reproduced and at times resisted gendered norms. By focusing on how these processes unfolded in Camelia's life, I show how Romanian women balanced interdependence and agency in their everyday lives in London, a tension that underscores most of the processes described in this thesis. By focusing on Camelia's competing commitments of work, education, and care, this chapter provides an

introduction to the tensions of the Boian household which then echo throughout this thesis – as favours, duty and relationships with other Romanians (whether kin or not) become highly contested.

Chapter 3 – Being a good host to one's family: Debating kinship, duty and obligation

Chapter 3 explores kinship for Romanians in London, focusing on the notions of duty and obligation. This chapter continues to focus on Camelia, this time unpacking the process of taking in her siblings and helping them get settled in London. By exploring the different obligations involved in this process, this chapter analyses the interdependencies and power imbalances between family members which underscore processes of migration. It explores the contested role of self-interest to showcase the 'dark side of kinship' (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak, 2020) and to highlight how claims and counter-claims of helping family abroad underscore kinship and migration processes. These tensions lay the foundation for the exchange of favours I explore in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 – 'I wasn't helped, I helped myself': The 'ordinary ethics' of helping other Romanians

Chapter 4 widens the focus from the previous chapter to look at how Romanians offer and receive help from their co-nationals, outside of kinship obligations. It traces the different dimensions of helping co-nationals (taking them in, helping them get their *acte* (papers) or finding work) to analyse the 'economy of favours' (Ledeneva, 1998) between Romanians in London. Rather than a pseudo-economic exchange, favours emerge as fundamentally social and moral acts for my interlocutors, shaped by a set of obligations about how one should behave as both helper and helped. It is at this point that the familiar riddle occurs: how come most of the Romanians I met told me to beware of our co-nationals, despite the fact that they relied on other Romanians for most aspects of their life in London? To answer this question, I unpack the notion of mistrust and show how it too is part of the 'ordinary ethics' at play in debates of helping one's co-nationals.

Chapter 5 – The political affordances of favours: Exploring encounters with the state at a Romanian-run foodbank

Chapter 5 uses the ethnographic example of a Romanian-run foodbank to unpack how Romanians come into contact with the state. The founding and running of the foodbank helpfully illustrate how a blend of bureaucracy and favours were used to support Romanians and to represent the community to local authorities. The service provision in this case acted as a continuation of the favours at play in Romanians' lives, similarly underpinned by complex 'ordinary ethics'. It is this culturally intimate type of service provision that in turn helped the most destitute Romanians during the pandemic, showing us the political resistance afforded by favours. By blending bureaucracy and favours, the foodbank valorised certain kinds of labour and mobilities which were discounted by the state during, as well as before and after, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 6 – From the *nanocip* to 'a plot of land to live off': Conspiratorial thinking and vernacular politics

Chapter 6 takes a step further to explore my interlocutors' political views through the medium of COVID-19 and vaccine conspiracy theories. In this chapter, I argue that conspiratorial thinking serves not as a one-off pandemic impulse, but a form of vernacular politics. I show this by unpacking COVID-19 conspiracies as reliant on 'bureaucratic imagination' through which my participants express their scepticism not simply about the vaccine, but also about the authority of the state. Borrowing from and extending Vintilă Mihăilescu's term of 'politics of resentment', I show how conspiratorial thinking is born out of my participants' lives in a post-socialist context, their experiences of perceived difference in London, and their future yearning for a 'plot of land to live off'. Norms of rurality and modesty soon turn into neonationalism as my participants differentiate their political hopes from those of a racialised 'Other', voting for a new far-right political party in the process.

Chapter 1: Westward mobility as (failed) hope: Situating Romanians' reasons and hope(s) for migration

A few nights after moving into the Boians' household in September 2020, I woke to loud banging coming from the living room and I sleepily went to enquire about the commotion. Camelia, Marcel, and their three children had arrived from Romania late the previous night. I had arrived a few days before them and let myself into the house using a key left under a brick, carefully hidden between overfilled wheelie bins. My hosts bickered as they unloaded numerous goods from their car, struggling to organise the bounty before the young ones woke up. Sacks of potatoes, which left tracks of dirt on the floor, were followed by glimmering honey jars that the couple would later sell in the UK. Crates of fragrant grapes from their family's garden filled the room with a sweet scent. I helped Camelia move the foodstuff to the garage where dusty shelves were stacked with unlabelled jars of *gem*, *zacuscă*, and *bulion*.[10]

After an hour of labouring away, Camelia and I sat down to catch our breath. The recent trip to Romania had indisposed Camelia who had had a tiresome few months. She passed her exams at a local college, had a baby, and home-schooled her two young children during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Rather than resting, the family visited Romania for three weeks in August, as soon as restrictions on international travel allowed it. Their visit was far from a holiday. Over the space of three weeks, the Boians attended medical appointments, pursued bureaucratic updates, and continued building their house in the Moldovan countryside. They spent a couple of days travelling to Bucharest to see a specialist for their eldest daughter's health problems. Despite being told that no appointments were available, the family later received a phone call offering them an appointment, after Marcel slipped the receptionist 100 lei[11] on their way out. The family also applied for passports for their baby and middle child, although they were also eligible for British passports. When I mentioned this, Camelia explained that her children must have Romanian passports to avoid 'forgetting where they came from' and maintain the possibility of returning one day. Camelia and Marcel also used their time in Romania to add costly fixtures like doors or windows to their house in their native village. Marcel even dashed to the village hall to enquire about buying some agricultural land 'to have there, just in case'.[12] Upon finding that the mayor had acquired most of the land on the village outskirts with plans to sell it at an

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[10] Homemade canned fruit and vegetable products were common in my interlocutors' pantries, often received from family members in Romania. *Gem* refers to homemade jam, *zacuscă* is a homemade paste of fire-roasted vegetables, and *bulion* is thin homemade tomato sauce often used in soups and stews.

[11] The *leu* (RON) is the currency of Romania. As of 29 April 2024, one RON amounted to 0.17 GBP, meaning that 100 lei corresponds to approximately £17.

[12] I explore the importance of land in Chapter 6, where I show how rural land regimes were in fact deeply intertwined with national and personal identity for my interlocutors.

extortionate rate, Marcel lost his temper. However, Camelia remained convinced that buying a plot of land was needed to safeguard their family's potential future in the village.

Despite disappointment with corrupt local officials and dysfunctional public services, Camelia did not question returning to Romania one day. During her visits back home, she took small steps to secure this possibility. One important task was visiting extended family members and sending parcels with goods from London, as well as receiving parcels from Romania themselves and talking via instant messaging and video-calls. If they are to return to Romania one day, the Boians may need to rely on family members for advice and help. 'Romania is no longer the one we imagine from abroad,' Camelia added enigmatically. 'Things are changing.'

Camelia valued the sense of community 'at home' (*acasă*), which she found was missing in the UK, especially during the first COVID-19 lockdown. The few months before the visit described above showed her a void of community in London, as Camelia put it: 'you can't go to a neighbour to ask for a potato'. She also struggled with the lack of land for agriculture, a valuable resource in times of economic hardship. These experiences during the pandemic solidified Camelia's wish to return to Romania one day. She foresaw 'dark times ahead' for the UK, mirroring Italy where Romanians became 'the least liked community'. However, Camelia concluded, Romanians have many 'gifts from God' – such as ingenuity and resourcefulness – and they ought to return *acasă* to make the most of them and use them to escape the ills of life in Romania, such as corruption.

Despite Camelia's apparent conviction, the Boians' plans to return to Romania came undone in conversation only hours later. On the very same evening as their return to London, Marcel jovially asked me: 'What do you think? Should we buy a house in the UK?'. I blankly stared back at him. After all, I had just spent the afternoon talking to Camelia about their plans to return to Romania, the remaining construction tasks of their house, and the costly land on the village outskirts. Making a 'shhh' sound, Marcel added: 'Camelia doesn't approve. She thinks we will stay here if we buy a house in the UK'. Jokingly joining the conversation, Camelia joked that Marcel should focus his attention on one house at a time, asking how he will buy a house in London if they do not even have curtains *acasă* in Romania.

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Rather than helping predict where the Boians will settle in five years' time, the episode above highlights the hope and multiple future trajectories present in their lives, carefully maintained through a range of social and material arrangements. Through regular visits and investments in Romania, the mobility of the Boian family, their hopes for migration and their future trajectories remained in flux. The Boians' mobility involved not only movement between different transnational spaces, but also between different temporalities and regimes of value. Simultaneous engagement and imagination of their lives in Romania and the UK, and the value regimes underscoring these (such as their children not 'forgetting where they came from'), informed their lives in the present and their hopes for the future. The Boians were not

unique among my interlocutors in this respect, as I show throughout this chapter. What the scene above highlights is that for most of the Romanians I got to know in London, Westward mobility came with a set of hopes that connected both different spaces and different temporalities.

Using the concept of 'hope' to explore migration is of course not a novel approach. The analytical lens of hope is well-established both in the literature and in the everyday lives of migrants who are routinely asked for the reasons behind their mobility. In this chapter, I purposefully resist the urge to simply categorise my participants' diverse hopes for their mobility in order to provide a list of their reasons to come to the UK. This resistance is politically minded, inspired by calls to 'de-migranticise' migration research (Dahinden, 2016), and to avoid mirroring state-centred processes where migrants are asked their reasons for being in the UK with an aim of rendering certain reasons, and by extension certain migrants, higher in hierarchies of belonging. Instead, in this chapter I use my participants' narratives of hope about their mobility to explore the context of their lives and to provide a historical and political foundation for the discussions in the rest of this thesis.

Anthropological perspectives on hope

Hope is a well-explored concept in anthropological literature, providing useful insights informing my approach in this chapter. Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight (2019) defined hope as one of six dimensions through which the future may be related to the present, alongside anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, and destiny. They theorised hope as a form of 'futural momentum' (Bryant and Knight, 2019:134), perpetually in motion towards the pursuit of a desired future. For my participants, hope emerged as both future-oriented and backwards-looking. As Frances Pine aptly put it, migration does not operate according to unilinear time, but is instead 'both future orientated and (nearly always) backwards looking', capturing the lives of migrants in different temporalities of past, present and future and across spaces of 'home and elsewhere' (2014:S98).

These spatial and temporal aspects of migrants' hope can be argued to stem from the indeterminacy of hope. In his monograph about the Suvavou people of Fiji seeking compensation for their ancestral land, Hirokazu Miyazaki argues that hope becomes a 'method of knowledge' (2004:5) where indeterminacy becomes indispensable. Since hope refers to an uncertain future that might not unfold according to plan, it holds analytical potential to consider what knowledge is truly for. I echo this epistemological commitment in my approach to hope in this chapter, since my participants' hope for the future, as the Boians' above, remains unfixed and therefore needs to be captured ethnographically in its indeterminacy. However, my participants' spatially and temporally unfixed plans must be materially and socially safeguarded despite, or perhaps because of, their indeterminacy. Writing about a football game for his Sarajevo informants, Stef Jansen (2016) outlines the difference between two regimes of hope – intransitive hope, as an affect or a state of hopefulness, and transitive hope(s) focused

on a specific future outcomes. Jansen warns of jumping too quickly from transitive hope(s) situated in a specific context to indeterminate hopefulness for a 'better future'.

Both kinds of hopes emerged and grew closely intertwined in my participants' lives. Many of my interlocutors held transitive hopes for their Westward mobility: to accumulate savings destined for a house in their native village, to repay their debts, to provide better opportunities for their children, or to send money to their families, among many other individual hopes such as further study or romantic fulfilment. While these hopes shared an overarching material nature, they also stood in for Romanians' pursuit of 'making a living,' which blends economic activity with 'being part of a collective that gives meaning to life, makes it "worth the trouble"' (Narotzky and Besnier, 2014:S6; Cîrstea, 2019). These transitive hopes could therefore be understood as amounting to an intransitive hopefulness for a 'better future' – an imagined future of peace, economic security, and control over one's livelihood by returning to Romania, or for more middle-class and established migrants, via upward social mobility in the UK. Reflecting on these the two types of hope set out by Jansen (2016) provides a useful reminder that they work as a dialectic, reinforcing and underlining one another. While the indeterminacy of hopefulness remains important, it is also born out of a very specific set of historical and political circumstances. This intransitive hope takes a clear, political shape in my participants' accounts, rooted as Jansen (2016) reminded us in a specific spatial-temporal context of life in a postsocialist country, but also of hyper-mobility within Europe and of a desired future back in the homeland. As Dzenovska and De Genova wrote (2018), hope may not be placed in causes or ideas favoured by anthropologists, but may instead contribute to the perpetuation of capitalism, right-wing extremism, or religious fundamentalism. The 'desire for the political', they argued, emerges from the desire to 'overcome the present […] in the name of an alternative (better) future)' (2018:3).

This desire for the political is echoed in the scene at the start of this chapter, showing how the Boians' hopes for their mobility irreversibly combined different temporalities of past, present, and future. The past is illustrated in both Camelia's narrative and the goods she and Marcel brought from Romania. Foodstuff such as *gem, zacuscă* and *bulion* remind of the canning work required during the 'culture of shortage' (Chelcea, 2002) of socialism where scarce food resources meant that the gluts of vegetables from subsistence agriculture needed to be carefully preserved to be consumed during the harsh winter months. As Camelia's garage exemplifies (as would the kitchen cupboards of this author), these canning practices continue well after the fall of socialism, and eventually make it into crammed storage spaces at the other end of the continent. Echoes of the past also emerged in Camelia's narrative where corruption and patronage networks coloured the experiences of the Boians' summer visit – when Marcel bribed a receptionist in a doctor's clinic or when he grew enraged at the mayor's tactics of acquiring agricultural land only to sell it at extortionate rates. These experiences of corruption which Camelia disapproved of, but considered redeemable through using Romanians' 'gifts from God' of ingenuity and resourcefulness, existed in stark contrast with her present experiences of life in the UK. She juxtaposed her past experiences in Romania with the failings of life in the UK during the COVID-

19 lockdowns, such as a 'lack of community' and a missing sense of neighbourliness. These experiences also underlined her dissatisfaction with Marcel's playful questions about buying a house in the UK in the present, which contrasted with her ambitions of a future return to Romania. This future was perhaps most clearly illustrated by Camelia and Marcel's recent visit to Romania. It was made through bureaucratic and brick-and-mortar investments, as well as complex narratives about belonging. Camelia's account of the family's busy time in Romania listed many bureaucratic appointments, such as issuing Romanian passports, meant to safeguard the family's potential return. Investments in their house in their native village and in their social network similarly laid the foundations of a potential future *acasă*. Her claims of Romanians' 'gifts from God' requiring a return to the motherland and her prophesising of 'dark times in the UK,' mirroring the racialised portrayal of Romanians in Italy and the economic uncertainty they experienced during the financial crisis, similarly underlined a potential future return to Romania.

In this chapter, I trace and tease out these different temporalities captured in my participants' hopes for their mobility. I artificially separate the postsocialist past, the mobile present, and the imagined return to the homeland to offer a contextual foundation for the body of this thesis. Despite my efforts to tease out these timelines, they remain intertwined in the life stories on which I draw in this chapter and throughout this thesis as a whole. As the brief account of the Boians' arrival scene shows, the temporal aspect of migration irreversibly combines the past, present, and future. Naturally, these ethnographic findings are well-founded in the anthropological literature. Abundant anthropological scholarship that goes beyond the scope of this chapter refutes a unilinear understanding of time born out of modernity and the teleological nature of progress (Bear, 2016; Bryant and Knight, 2019). In a recent volume, Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight (2019) posited that anthropologists should focus on 'orientations' to grasp the relationship between different time points and keep this relationship open-ended and indeterminate, which I consider key to the study of migration. Similar orientations occurred for my participants in their approach to spatiality. The hopes for their mobility combined different spaces of 'home' (*acasă*) and 'abroad' (*străinătate*), captured at different time points, as the changing of space marked the changing of time and vice versa. For my participants, *străinătate* mostly referred to Western Europe as a site of promise both during their mobility and their lives in Romania. A similar example emerged in Dace Dzenovska's work with Latvians who worked in England to seek a future past, one defined by precarious labour in the UK, but with some social welfare entitlements reminiscent of socialist welfare:

> Leaving Latvia, then, is an action shaped by the patterns through which particular places are integrated into structures of state-regulated neoliberal capitalism, by memories of futures inherent in the Soviet mode of organizing economic and political life, and by historically shaped and at the same time profoundly postsocialist spatial imaginaries (and material realities), which posit "the West" as the measure of past, present, and future and as a desirable location. (2018:25).

Dzenovska argued that leaving Latvia aimed to change her participants' life standards, acting as a 'spatial fix' (2018:25) that also combined multiple temporalities and material realities. I argue that leaving Romania was a similar 'spatial fix' for my participants, rooted in the hope(s) attached to Westward mobility which combined the past, present and future. I start by examining the role of the (post)socialist past through the life and mobility story of Iulia, a Romanian woman in her forties.

The past – the (post)socialist transformation, or 'grija zilei de mâine'

I first met Iulia over Zoom in September 2020 and we repeatedly spoke online during my fieldwork, never meeting in person because of her demanding job as a 'key worker' in a supermarket. Born in a small town in Moldova shrunken by emigration, Iulia's entire family lived abroad (*în străinătate*). Her brother and niece were in London, while her mom lived in Italy. Her father moved to Germany and her step-sister also lived in London. Mirroring her hyper-mobile family, Iulia always felt 'in between two worlds' growing up. She was raised by her mother, her great-grandparents and grandparents, after her father left when she was young. Her great-grandparents were minority ethnics on both sides. Considered to have 'unhealthy social origins', Iulia's grandparents dug sewage channels and frequently relocated according to the state's construction projects. During these relocations, her extended family usually lived in cramped studio flats where an improvised curtain hung on a string separated the sitting room where Iulia and her brother slept from the bedroom shared by her grandparents and mother.

Everything changed for Iulia's family after the Revolution in 1989. A decree in the early 1990s meant that her grandparents qualified for early retirement so they moved to a small house in the countryside. Iulia and her brother were fascinated by the greenery, spending their holidays digging the vegetable patch and chasing chickens. Away from the village, those years also meant being 'dirt poor' (*sărăcie lucie*) in the city, where Iulia's mother could not make ends meet despite working a strenuous physical job and receiving food staples from the countryside. To cope with the financial strain of the 1990s, Iulia's mother went to Israel for work when Iulia was sixteen. After Iulia turned thirty, her mother moved to Italy where she has been living ever since. Iulia eventually moved to Italy herself, together with her husband, two daughters, and dog. When I asked why she went to Italy, she explained that she wanted a certain living standard (*nivel de trai*), as well as stability and trust in the government. In Romania, Iulia and her husband worried about what the next day held – *grija zilei de mâine* – a common expression in Romanian used to describe living from hand to mouth. She colourfully put it: 'I even had to patch up my knickers'. The family had to plan every purchase – Iulia's salary would pay the bills, while her husband's salary was reserved for daily costs and expenses for the children. In London, despite the costly rent, the family could afford occasional holidays or meals at a restaurant.

Besides finances, Iulia despised the corruption and dysfunctional public services in Romania. Bribes were vital to attract doctors' attention: 'if you don't stuff [money in] their pocket, they don't even look at you' (*dacă nu bagi în buzunar, nici nu se uită la tine*). Interactions with doctors defined

Iulia's experiences of mobility. Just before going to Italy, she was diagnosed with incipient cancer in Romania and was advised against uprooting her life at such a critical moment. Once in Italy, Iulia's experience of healthcare shifted completely: 'Everything was sorted out in a clinic […] It took longer to take my clothes on and off.' (*S-a rezolvat totul în ambulatoriu, […] a durat mai mult să mă îmbrac și să mă dezbrac*). Iulia was immediately seen, taken for some tests and received treatment.

For her job as a live-in carer in Italy, Iulia found a family who agreed to house her children and even her dog. Despite her positive experience in Italy, Iulia's husband struggled to find work. He left after one year, moving to work in Belgium for three months and then to Portugal for three months, before finally arriving in London. After one year in London, he confronted Iulia and told her they need to find a way to be together – he had had enough of 'marriage through Facebook' (*căsătorie prin Facebook*) and 'raising children over the Internet' (*cresc copii pe internet*). The move to London was challenging for Iulia who had little English and was determined to no longer work as a carer. She eventually found a job in a kitchen and then in customer service. When I met her, Iulia worked as a supervisor at a supermarket. However, Iulia's expectations of life in the UK were undone. She found that people lacked a good work ethic and that efficiency and politeness were only for show. She mockingly hinted at this by adding in English: 'The Great Britain is *not* so great anymore'.

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Iulia's story illustrates the well-established link between migration and the postsocialist transformation[13] in Romania, present in academic literature and the narratives of my participants alike. The regime change in 1989 came with severe repercussions for Iulia's family, as her single mother struggled to make ends meet despite being in full-time work and receiving food staples from the countryside. Westward mobility became a welcomed solution, one which appealed to many residents in Iulia's hometown where many people, including most of her family, had gone abroad for work. As the late Tod Hartman outlined, borrowing from Zizek, outward migration becomes an avenue towards an 'utopian object of impossible fullness' (2007:188) steeped in the contradictions of postsocialism. For his participants from Bistrița, a Transylvanian town facing similar emigration, utopia was defined by a sense of an always emergent 'normality'. The present existed as a void for a future that was distant, yet always emergent. Migration became a key strategy, both celebrated and denigrated in Bistrița, for residents to grasp this 'normality', echoing a yearning for 'normal lives' depicted in other ethnographies

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[13] Studies of postsocialism amount to a significant 'transitological writing' (Verdery, 1996:16), dominated by economists, legal scholars, and political scientists. Contributions made by anthropologists detail the many contradictions and fake dichotomies behind the 'transition' narrative prevalent in these other disciplines which implied a clear shift from socialism to postsocialism or a simple switch between Communism and a liberal market democracy (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999). In the words of Stark and Bruszt (1998:7): 'We see social change not as transition from one order to another but as transformation – rearrangements, reconfigurations, and recombinations that yield new interweavings of the multiple social logics that are a modern society.' I take inspiration from this literature and use the term 'transformation' rather than 'transition' in this chapter to refer to the decades following the fall of the Communist regime in Romania.

of Eastern European countries (Jansen, 2015; Brković, 2017b). Borrowing from Frances Pine's account of the Polish cities of Łodz and Lublin (2014), migration emerges both as a symbol of hope and a reaction to hopelessness in a postsocialist context, as an economic strategy for dealing with the results of the transformation and the new, uncertain future replacing the set futures of the Communist regime. In this section, I use Iulia's life history to trace this link between the postsocialist transformation and Westward mobility for my participants. I offer a brief history of Romanian socialism, before unpacking the social, economic and political context of the postsocialist transformation that motivated many people like Iulia to leave Romania.

The rise of the 'Wizard of Oz': a brief history of Romanian socialism

The Romanian Communist Party (PCR – *Partidul Comunist Român*) came to power in 1947, after three years of attempts both inside the country and in the Soviet Union (Hitchins, 2014). The first decade of Romanian Communism followed the Soviet blueprint closely, aiming to create the 'new man' of the socialist era (Hitchins, 2014:249). The main aim was industrialisation, to be accomplished by nationalising the means of production and introducing centralised economic planning. Alongside significant social and economic reform, the first decade of Communism also aimed to loosen any links to Western Europe, on which Romania relied heavily during the nineteenth century to obtain its independence and to shape its political and economic institutions (Hitchins, 2014). The new People's Republic of Romania was instead meant to look towards the Soviet Union for both economic and ideological guidance, with the introduction of compulsory Russian lessons in schools, the emphasis of Romania's Slavic heritage, the creation of joint Romanian-Soviet companies (s*ovroms*), and the replacement of old elites and intellectuals by obedient party cadres who operated in all spheres of life (Verdery, 1991).

Alongside rapid industrialisation, one of the most significant socio-economic reforms, which fascinated the few foreign anthropologists in the country[14], was collectivisation. The collectivisation of agriculture started in 1948 with the seizure of privately-owned agricultural land and livestock by the Party-state, at a time when over three quarters of the population lived in the countryside. For most Romanian peasants, collectivisation was 'a grievous assault on their very conceptions of themselves as human beings' (Kligman and Verdery, 2011:4), requiring threats, coercion and state-mandated violence to ensure compliance. At the village level, collectivisation sought to redefine political belonging from

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[14] Romania was the first Soviet state to permit the entry of Western anthropologists, mainly from the United States, starting in 1965 and increasing after President Nixon's official state visit in 1969. Some prominent names include Jean Cuisenier from France, Arne Martin Klausen and Tove Skotvedt from Norway, 'the American phalanx' comprised of Andreas Argyres, Eugene Banks, James Patterson, Katherine Verdery, Gail Kligman, and also 'the self-entitled Romanian Research Group' started by Professor John W. Cole from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, including Sam Beck, David Kideckel, Marilyn McArthur, Steve Randall, Steve Sampson (Geană, 2002:101). Processes of collectivisation and later of decollectivisation fascinated some of these anthropologists, notably Katherine Verdery who presented changing property regimes to an Anglophone anthropological readership (Verdery, 1996, 2003; Kligman and Verdery, 2011).

a territorial and kin-based model to one of loyalty to the Party (Verdery, 2003; Kligman and Verdery, 2011). At a national level, it sought to destroy the peasantry as a social class and the village as a symbolic site for their political belonging, to be replaced by a new social organisation defined by socialist industrialisation, collective agriculture, and Party loyalty (Mungiu-Pippidi and Althabe, 2002; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010). As Kligman and Verdery noted, collectivisation was therefore 'instrumental in constituting Romania's Party-state' (2011:452). While Iulia and her brother did not encounter the countryside until the 1990s, most of my participants cherished memories of the rural milieu during their childhoods. None of them remember the process of collectivisation, but those in their forties or fifties recall working on collective farms alongside their parents as young children or being taken to do 'patriotic work' by their school or university on state-owned farms.

From 1960 onwards, the following decade of 'national Communism' (Hitchins, 2014:327) saw the PCR distance itself from the USSR, with Party leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej signing a deceptively called 'Declaration of Independence' from the Soviet Union in 1964, following the departure of the Soviet Army in 1958 (Hitchins, 2014:273; Verdery, 1991:105). Dej pursued an expansion of industry that countered Khruschev's plans for division of labour within the Soviet bloc, which envisioned Romania as a country of agricultural production. When Nicolae Ceaușescu came to power after Dej's death in 1965, plans for industrialisation were doubled by systematic urbanisation (Sampson, 1984) that encouraged building in urban areas, such as large concrete blocks of flats to accommodate factory workers, and larger villages were upgraded to the status of towns overnight. It is likely that the sewage channels digging undertaken by Iulia's grandparents contributed to these projects of industrialisation and urbanisation. Similar to Iulia's grandparents moving according to the state's demands on their labour, many workers from the countryside were relocated to urban centres to provide the required labour force for state-owned factories and co-operatives. In terms of ideology, historian Keith Hitchins describes this period as one of 'détente' (2014:270) with fewer imprisonments and laxer cultural production control, as well as better provisioning for the everyday needs of the public. Availability of food and consumer goods increased, apartment construction expanded, and free access to health and education was provided to the population at large.

This 'détente' was halted by an intense ideological turn during the 1970s, mainly after Ceaușescu's state visits to North Korea and China. The dictator's new interest in ideology manifested in his infamous 'July theses' speech of 1971 which proclaimed the worker as the ideal socialist citizen, both as an economic contributor and a moral standard of ideological conformity and loyalty to the party (Hitchins, 2014:266). This ideological turn marked the beginning of the most repressive and harsh decade of Romanian socialism, unfolding under Ceaușescu's dictatorship and ever-expanding cult of personality for him and his wife. In 1974, Ceaușescu held the three most important offices – president, general secretary of the PCR and commander of all armed forces, raising his wife Elena to a position of power second only to him (Verdery, 1991; Gallagher, 2005). The Ceaușescus' political power and impunity was safeguarded by an extensive network of agents and informants recruited by the *Securitate*,

the state intelligence service and secret police. Katherine Verdery aptly called the *Securitate* the 'system producing paper' (1996:24) that ran parallel to and, to some extent, ensured the functioning of the system producing goods. Extensive censorship and state-mandated violence safeguarded the moral order of proletarian citizenship, creating a wide-spread mistrust as many Romanians became informants on their relatives, neighbours, or colleagues (anthropologists were not immune to this, as Verdery (2018) showed in her autobiographical volume about her *Securitate* dossier). It is unsurprising that Romania held the highest Party membership in the Soviet bloc after the Soviet Union dissolved in 1989, as many Romanians joined in desperate attempts to access the social and material advantages needed to make ends meet, rather than because of a belief in the cause (Hitchins, 2014).

To borrow Katherine Verdery's words, the Romanian Communist Party embodied the 'Wizard of Oz' (2004:143) – imagined as an absolute and omniscient totalitarian power, yet deeply plagued by anarchy, lack of socialist conviction in the masses, and dysfunctional systems and institutions. Rather than failures of socialism, these mechanisms were key to its operation, made especially apparent during the 1980s. Alarmed by the Solidarity movement in Poland, Ceaușescu imposed strict austerity measures meant to repay all foreign debt. By the mid to late 1980s, Romania became the most repressive regime in the region (alongside Albania), as the dictator's goals were combined with the effects of the Gulf Oil crisis, among other things such as a devastating earthquake in Romania in 1977 (Verdery, 2004). Defined by a 'culture of shortage' (Chelcea, 2002), everyday survival was jeopardised as manufacture outputs were destined for export, wages were cut despite longer hours and higher production quotas, prices for the few available consumer goods rose, and even rationed foodstuff could only be obtained after hours of queuing and bribery. Large power and heating cuts during the winter saw many Romanians suffer, especially in cities. Cultural production continued to be under heavy censorship, and state-produced media was reduced to a two-hour evening programme that amplified the personality cult of the Ceaușescus (supplemented by the clandestine radio broadcasts of Radio Free Europe). Not even Gorbachev's visit in 1987 managed to convince Ceaușescu about the need to restructure the regime in order to save it, as per *perestroika* in the Soviet Union (Hitchins, 2014).

A return to Europe: the postsocialist transformation starting in the 1990s

Despite and perhaps because of Ceaușescu's extensive surveillance and ideological control, the Revolution of December 1989 brought an abrupt end to the Communist regime in Romania, the only ex-Soviet state where the regime fell violently (Gallagher, 2005; Deletant, 2012). While suspicion still surrounds the Revolution's origins as a true people's revolt or a coup orchestrated by Communist politicians fearing the Party's demise under Ceaușescu (Hitchins, 2014), anti-Communist demonstrations burst out in multiple cities in Romania a few days before Christmas in 1989. Violent clashes with armed police and military resulted in hundreds of casualties until the army laid down their weapons. The Ceaușescus fled Bucharest in a helicopter after the army switched sides, but the couple was captured, sentenced in a mock trial and executed on a Christmas Day broadcast on live television.

Exuberant celebrations erupted in response, especially in urban areas, where the fall of the Communist regime was equated with a 'return to Europe' (Verdery, 1996:110; Hitchins, 2014:292).

Despite hopes of a seamless return, Romania was still far from its European ambitions. The EU Trade Commissioner proclaimed that the country lacked 'an economic and political system founded on the same principles prevailing within the Community' in 1990 (Gallagher, 2005:20). One significant contention was the continued influence of the pre-1989 political elites who remained in power during the 1990s (Verdery, 1996) – a 'resurrected Communist Party' in the words of Kideckel's participants from the Jiu Valley (1993:208). The National Salvation Front (*Frontul Salvării Naționale* – FSN), initially a non-partisan body meant to supervise the reintroduction of a pluralist political system, morphed into a political party in its own right and ran in the first free elections in 1990. In control of administration, economic institutions and media, FSN unsurprisingly won the elections with Ion Iliescu, a former high-ranking Communist Party official, being elected as president with 85% of votes. Notions of Europe, democracy, civil society and national interest were endowed with 'moral significance' during the early 1990s, and the ruling FSN and the opposition both fought to explain how their initiatives would better the country (Verdery, 1996:126).

Nevertheless, life in Romania during the 1990s involved low living standards for the majority, high inflation, mass unemployment, the removal of the social safety net developed during Communism and the creation of an oligarchic business class (Gallagher, 2005; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006). Signalling a change from the FSN rule, the new government elected in 1996 initiated a series of 'shock therapies' of rapid privatisation, extensive sale of state assets such as state-owned factories, and an extreme limitation of state welfare provisioning (Zamfir *et al.*, 2010). As Dzenovska (2018) noted a few decades later, it is ironic how some Eastern European countries did better at implementing the neoliberal model than their Western counterparts. Iulia's family experiences illustrate this period of instability and aggressive privatisation. Although her grandparents benefited from early retirement and could start anew in the countryside, Iulia's mother struggled to make ends meet despite working full-time. As a single mother, the support she received was from her family members, such as food staples from subsistence agriculture, rather than the state.

Numerous anthropologists documented the failures of the postsocialist transformation in Romania where 'people, economies, and landscapes had to be re-arranged in order to bring the country 'into Europe'' (Dorondel, 2016:9). Industrial workers, previously heralded as the model socialist citizens, were suddenly unemployed and lacked prospects when factories were sold off and not replaced by other employment, as was the case for the miners in the Jiu Valley or the chemical plant workers in Făgăraș (Kideckel *et al.*, 2000; Friedman, 2007b; Kideckel, 2008). Work in urban settings also deviated from the prosperity that Romanians expected from the new market economy, although white-collar workers, such as those studied by Monica Heintz in Bucharest (2006), welcomed a capitalist work ethic more readily. However, market exchange processes associated with capitalism showed many continuities with the socialist socio-economic order. For example, open-air markets in Bucharest ran

not only according to the principles of the market, but also according to a well-worn system of bribes and protection fees (Mateescu and Chelcea, 2005).

Mass unemployment and declining prospects turned the internal migration that happened during socialism on its head, with urban workers relocating to the countryside. Rather than moving towards an agricultural model geared for the market, rural farmers employed familiar agrarian strategies to feed families suddenly left without work and with depreciated savings (Mungiu-Pippidi and Althabe, 2002). Iulia's grandparents provide a key example of this process, where so-called economically inactive family members used subsistence agriculture to support their working urban-dwelling relatives. Although the effects of the transformation varied depending on different locations in the country (some towns in Transylvania attracted foreign investors and succeeded in rapidly creating new jobs and infrastructure), Romania's rural population was significantly impacted (Zamfir *et al.*, 2010).

As living standards decreased and inflation grew, corruption and bribery thrived and reshaped the brokerage networks of the socialist regime. The combination of these practices with neoliberal market rule and privatisation led to dysfunctional public services, as Stan (2012) showed in the context of healthcare where bribes mediated access to care. For Iulia, it meant needing to 'stuff the pockets' of doctors to receive medical attention after her cancer diagnosis. The continued influence of patronage networks abounded in other spheres of life in Romania, for example in how local officials and well-connected peasants manipulated processes of property restitution and decollectivisation (Mungiu-Pippidi and Althabe, 2002; Verdery, 2003; Dorondel, 2005, 2016). Similar processes of patronage and manipulation of policy for the interest of local elites occurred in the case of urban gentrification (Chelcea, 2006), private house restitution (Chelcea, 2003), and community-based forests (Vasile, 2000; Măntescu and Vasile, 2009). By applying Western-style property regimes and loans from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, processes of property restitution became part of the numerous 'new forms of Western colonization [sic] after 1989' (Verdery, 2003:4), alongside the top-down imposition of expertise, the harnessing of cheap Eastern European labour, and the super-saturation of markets with Western products.

'Romania is no longer the one we imagine from abroad'
The problems of the 1990s are decidedly different from contemporary life in Romania. Borrowing Camelia's words from the start of this chapter, 'Romania is no longer the one we imagine from abroad'. Things are indeed changing. However, the postsocialist transformation I briefly summarise above significantly impacted the social, economic and political conditions of my participants' lives and mobilities, whether they were old enough to remember Communism or not. For example, the low living standards impacted Iulia's entire adult life, as her and her husband struggled to support their families despite working two full-time jobs, just as her mother had struggled to support their family in the 1990s. The failings of the transformation materialised most starkly for Iulia when she was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, yet needed to 'stuff pockets' to receive medical attention. Brushes with

corruption also impacted Marcel and Camelia's recent visit to Romania in 2020, with which this chapter started. While Marcel happily bribed to secure a medical appointment for his daughter, Iulia despised bribing doctors in exchange for the care she felt she deserved. Similar experiences underline many of the life stories I unpack throughout this thesis. For the participants we will meet throughout this thesis, the aftershocks of the postsocialist transformation bring the past into conversation with their mobile present, as well as their imagined and desired future, as I show later in this chapter.

From an ethnographic point of view, the postsocialist transformation therefore continues to impact the lives and hopes of my participants. However, the theoretical relevance of the postsocialist transformation is more contentious, making the subject of an ample literature in anthropology.[15] Anthropologists have questioned the usefulness of the term 'postsocialism' since its inception three decades ago, recognising it as a flawed but necessary concept. Initial contributions rallied to counter the assumptions of other disciplines deemed to engage in 'transitology', which equated the fall of Communism with a linear transition to capitalism and democracy (Verdery, 1996). Chris Hann argued that anthropologists provided 'the necessary corrective to the deficits of 'transitology'' (2002:1) as they emphasised how individuals, communities, and state or international institutions made sense of the deconstruction of socialism. However, cracks soon emerged in the ideological, temporal, and spatial assumptions that laid the theoretical foundations of postsocialism.

Some critics argued that postsocialism stopped being analytically useful when it no longer coincided with social processes 'out there' (Humphrey in Hann *et al.,* 2001:13-14), going insofar as to claim that studies of postsocialist countries have a 'vanishing object' because people's concerns were no longer only about socialism (Boyer and Yurchak, 2008:9). To paraphrase Horvat and Štiks (2012), there was simply no more transition left. Other critics argued that the concept of postsocialism was tied to a temporal and spatial container that restricted analysis to a linear temporal progression between socialism and postsocialism within the geographical space of Eastern Europe (Hann *et al.,* 2002; Buchowski, 2004). Writing about Romania, the late Vintilă Mihăilescu deemed postsocialism to simply be an illustration of social evolutionism, 'constantly looking both forward to some promised land and backward to some lost paradise' (2014:29). Other critics took issue with the ideological underpinnings of the concept, mainly its preconceived Western and neoliberal foundations, which risked turning anthropology into area studies (Thelen, 2011). Drawing on convergences between postcoloniality and postsocialism, some scholars even suggested a new category of 'post-Cold War studies' (Chari and Verdery, 2009) to expand the territorial reach of the spatial, social and political effects of the Cold War system of power and knowledge (see also Cervinkova, 2012; Buchowski, 2019).

Building on these significant concerns, recent interventions continued to debate the conceptual durability of postsocialism. For example, Müller (2019) bid 'Goodbye, Postsocialism!', arguing that the

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[15] I draw on some of the relevant works below in order to situate and explain my use of the term, but by no means claim to provide a review of this expansive literature as a whole (see, among others, Giordano et al., 2014; Cullen Dunn and Verdery, 2015; Martin, 2021; Gallinat, 2022; Chelcea, 2023).

concept has finally run out of steam, as it refers to a vanishing object, emphasises rupture over continuity and risks falling into a territorial trap. He also pointed to the concept's orientalising potential, as it reflects 'specifically Western discourse, approaches and knowledge claims about the East' (Müller, 2019:543). While Müller's paper highlighted many established critiques in the concept of postsocialism, other recent interventions refused to bid postsocialism goodbye just yet, encouraging instead to 'radically open and using it, selectively, as a toolkit, without relying on deterministic assumptions and putative master narratives' (Chelcea, 2023:1). Some argued that as long as postsocialism remains an emic concept – present not only in people's narratives, but in the landscapes and social worlds they occupy – it remains useful (Gallinat, 2022; Kaneff, 2022). While there may be nothing left to 'transition'[16], contemporary social and economic phenomena show the continued relevance of postsocialism, as I briefly outlined above using Iulia's life story. Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druță (Chelcea and Druță, 2016) similarly document this continued relevance by proposing the term 'zombie socialism'. It refers to how political and economic elites in Eastern European countries – who the authors refer to as the winners of the transition – mobilise the socialist past to ideologically discipline their populations, accusing them of 'being communist, outdated, anti-democratic, anti-meritocratic, unsustainable, regressive, covertly totalitarian, or at best, naive' (Chelcea and Druță, 2016:526). Their intervention shows how representations of socialism and the political apparatus remade in its wake cannot be separated from, but are central to, understanding contemporary life in Central and Eastern Europe.

New theoretical developments also loosen the temporal and spatial boundedness of postsocialism, proposing categories of comparison that go beyond the established binaries of East-West, democratic-socialist, or free-totalitarian (Frederiksen and Knudsen, 2015). For example, Gabriela Nicolescu and Robert Deakin recently coined the term 'socialist fragments' in their comparison of council houses in Britain and handicraft co-operatives in socialist Romania, defined as indexing 'a way of life and labour that has been lost or is under threat, and which is lived as heritage' (2022:131). They propose expanding the theoretical and analytical reach of postsocialism by divorcing it from a particular historical state form, moving away from 'the Cold War imposition of an ideologically laden understanding of geography' (Kaneff, 2022:213). This spatial stretching of postsocialism proves relevant to my participants' practices in the UK. In Chapter 3, I unpack the moral and ethical dimensions of the exchange of favours that operates between Romanians as they look for jobs, accommodation and support in London, rooted in the 'economy of favours' (Ledeneva, 1998) in postsocialist Romania. These webs of support woven by my participants contain similar postsocialist fragments and combine these with contemporary struggles given their place in global capitalism.

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[16] Some postsocialist countries including Romania have 'transitioned' so well that they have implemented market ideas and neoliberal reform more faithfully than countries with a longer capitalist tradition in Western Europe or North America, becoming the 'poster children of neoliberalism' (Chelcea and Druță, 2016:538).

Alongside the spatial extensions of postsocialism, I also find the temporal multiplicities it combines helpful for my analysis in this chapter and this thesis as a whole. As Felix Ringel recently argued, postsocialism affords a temporal multiplicity that can be useful for understanding the future since 'the continued problematization of the past is giving us not insights into the reality of the past, but into the concerns of our interlocutors in the present and with regard to their future' (Ringel, 2022:14). The time of postsocialism can therefore be described as 'heterochrony' (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2006, 2017) – as giving rise to a heterogenous multiplicity, rather than binary dualisms of before/after. This 'looping temporality of the postsocialist subject' (Martin, 2021:no pagination) is key to unpacking my participants' mobile trajectories. In this chapter, I use this temporal multiplicity to make sense of the multiple temporalities invested in the process of leaving (and perhaps one day returning to) Romania.

Migration provides an insight into the continued relevance of postsocialism as it spatially and temporally expands the reach of postsocialism, as an 'analytical tool [that] helps explain global hierarchies' (Kaneff, 2022:212). For example, Annist (2022) traces the continuities of postsocialist dispossession across nation-state borders and different temporalities in her work with Estonians in Britain. While migration provided increased status and prestige, the latter was only accessed in comparison to compatriots back 'home' in the Estonian countryside. In the UK, the same migrants struggled to access more than low-paid, temporary work and precarious living situations, linked to their position as Eastern Europeans. By paying attention to the postsocialist processes of dispossession both in Estonia and the UK, this example shows the analytical potential of postsocialism. Throughout this thesis, I draw on this potential of postsocialism to explain inequalities in both Romania and the UK, expanding its spatial and temporal reach. However, I remain aware of a potential orientalising consequence of only focusing on dispossession as the driver of migration. I am reminded here of Muller's claims about the orientalising risks of 'postsocialism', careful about the risk of portraying my participants as lowly postsocialist subjects who migrate to escape the failures of postsocialism 'at home'. Naturally, my participants draw on their frustrations with failing public institutions and abuses of power – such as Iulia's frustration with stuffing doctors' pockets – as reasons for their migration. However, stopping here would miss a significant part of the story. My participants' reasons for migration do more than escape the postsocialist transformation. Their narratives and experiences actively locate Westward mobility as hope, as I explore in the section below.

The present – Romania's recent exodus, or 'England was the last hope'

I first heard Marcel's life and migration story shortly after my arrival in the Boians' household. One evening in September 2020 after dinner, Camelia sent Marcel to bring some wine from the garage. He returned with two plastic bottles filled with homemade wine of a vibrant shade of red. The part of Moldova where the Boians come from is renowned for its vineyards, the couple proudly explained as they half-filled my glass and offered me sparkling water for a *șpriț*. Marcel took delight in sharing his

life story, crafting a narrative out of a string of failed attempts at social mobility and entrepreneurship. Intent on giving him a better life, Marcel's father insisted that he attended a boarding high school in the nearest city, but Marcel resented his time at the boarding school. Eager to prove his worth on his own two feet, Marcel left to work in Italy around 2005 shortly after finishing his high school exams. He travelled in a car with other Romanians and found work *la negru* ('on the black market') in construction. The hard, manual work did not agree with Marcel, who soon returned to Romania.

When Romania finally joined the EU in 2007, Marcel felt encouraged to pursue higher education. He explained that everyone was encouraged to attend university at the time, since EU accession was expected to create more qualified jobs and to grow expertise in all industries. Marcel worked in a supermarket to pay for his studies, which also included bribing professors whose courses he struggled to pass. At this point in the story, Marcel laughed mockingly: 'Have you ever seen an engineer driving for Uber? In life, you don't need school!' rebutting his own naiveté at the time of Romania's EU accession. His first job as an engineer in a furniture factory meant earning little over minimum wage and taking a minibus at dawn only to return home in the late evening. '*Eee*, but the respect [you get] when everyone calls you Mr. Engineer!' he exclaimed. Only months after he started, Marcel was let go from this job because the small factory could no longer afford to pay his salary.

His next attempt at social mobility came through entrepreneurship, as Marcel attempted to set up a taxi company in his natal village after hearing that the Romanian government offered grants for young entrepreneurs. The first step was speaking to the village mayor who promised Marcel his support for this new business endeavour. At the village hall, however, bureaucrats sent Marcel from office to office without getting a straight answer. After paying someone at another village hall to explain the 'system', Marcel returned to apply for his license and attend the auction for the transport route. Three positive votes were needed but he only received two, after the mayor abstained. It later surfaced that the mayor intended to set up his own taxi company. Indignant at his failed business attempt, Marcel decided to come to the UK where a friend promised that good money could be made. 'England was the last hope!' he laughed.

Marcel's journey to the UK was nothing short of adventurous. A traffic jam on Romania's busiest transfer road led him to miss the departure of his carpool to London. Marcel found a truck driver who drove him to Nădlac, one of the biggest customs point in Western Romania. As soon as Marcel jumped down from the truck, he was turned back by the border police who prohibited crossing on foot. He laughed heartedly at how crazy he must have looked: a young lad, suitcase in hand, wanting to cross the border on foot at 10 pm at night, with London as his destination. He asked the border guards for a piece of paper on which he wrote *Londra* and hitchhiked. He eventually found a driver who would take him all the way to the UK: 'Where are you going?', 'London!', 'And how much will you give me?', '50 Euros', 'Jump in!'.

After a few days, Marcel made it to the UK. He arrived in London early in the morning and slept on a bench in a shopping centre. He eventually met his friend who brought him some Romanian

newspapers and helped him find accommodation in a house with other Romanians. Marcel initially worked in construction under another Romanian man's name since he did not have the right to work in the UK. During his first few years in the UK, Marcel painstakingly searched for better-paid and easier work, eventually training to be a traffic marshal and a forklift driver. During his summer visits to Romania, he also pursued another business idea and tried his hand at beekeeping. In 2013, Marcel met Camelia during one of his return visits to Romania. He tried to convince her to join him in the UK, but she refused and stayed in Romania until she finished her high school exams. The day after her last exam, Marcel returned to their village, gifts in hand. The two of them spent a couple of weeks together in Romania before visiting the local monastery to receive blessing for their journey to the UK. Camelia followed Marcel to the UK where they got married and soon had their first child.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Marcel's narrative of his life and mobility carefully illustrates many of the reasonings and motivations of Romanians who come to the UK. Like Marcel, many of my participants had previously tried their luck in Italy or Spain, an experience to which some of them looked back fondly as a space of cultural similarities and a period of discovery and independence, especially for young men. Alex, a thirty-something man who was friends with one of my housemates, had lived in Italy since age 18 and spoke Romanian with an Italian inflection often mocked by other Romanians. He cherished the time spent in Italy and dreamed of returning to live there one day. Dan, who I also met around the Boians' dinner table and whose story I focus on in the third section of this chapter, had first worked in Spain as a young man and longed to return due to the cultural similarities between Romania and Spain. To borrow Marcel's turn of phrase, England was 'the last hope' for many Romanians who saw it as an opportunity for well-paid and stable work. Like Marcel, many of my participants had struggled to get their business off the ground in Romania or to find work that paid enough. For these participants, Westward mobility represented both promise and opportunity. In effect, Marcel's story echoes the history of Romanian migration, which I summarise below.

The promises of Westward mobility during the 20th century

The promises of Westward mobility for Romanians stretch back all the way to the beginning of the 20th century. In the late 19th and early 20th century (both before and after Romania assumed its current geopolitical borders in 1918), Romania was predominantly a country of emigration. The first considerable out-flow was part of the wider migration from Eastern Europe to North America, with Transylvanians predominantly leaving to work in the United States (Rostás and Ţone, 2018). A generous immigration policy aiming to provide the required labour force to domesticise the prairies enabled the migration of Transylvanians to Canada and the United States (Culic, 2012). An anthology of 20th century texts exploring this wave of emigration documented the hopeful pursuit of a 'better life':

> Tough people, they took little notice of a few hours of work in a factory or in a workshop, compared to working the land, come rain or shine, from dawn 'til dusk, to which they were used at home. *Life over there was much better than life here*. (Negrea, 2018:38, my translation and emphasis).

Many of the Transylvanians who pursued this 'better life' in the United States often returned to their villages in Romania where they invested their newfound wealth, improved their social status and gained prestige (Rostás and Țone, 2018). Despite the significant challenges encountered during their North American migration (especially during the First and Second World War), the sentiment of Westward mobility as an avenue towards a 'better life' remained significant.

The appeal of Westward mobility continued after the Second World War, but repressive border control during state socialism only permitted certain kinds of international mobility. Besides party members travelling on diplomatic passports and state-managed labour migration (for example to the Persian Gulf), all Romanians intending to travel internationally required a passport and significant vetting by the *Securitate*, the state's intelligence services and secret police. Most applicants were placed under surveillance, forced to become an informer, or risked losing their jobs or jeopardising their family's positions in work or school. Illegal border crossings came with significant sanctions, including prison sentences between three to ten years, physical violence and potential fatal shooting by border guards, alongside 'extralegal risks' (Horváth, 2012:201) such as repercussions for the families of those who succeeded in crossing the border. In short, requesting a passport offered no guarantee of international mobility but it certainly placed the applicant and their social networks on the *Securitate*'s radar. However, the appeal of the West as a space of freedom and opportunity continued. For example, Western goods such as blue jeans, Coca Cola, or Kent cigarettes were highly desirable and often operated as a status symbol. Katherine Verdery memorably recalls a waitress in a hotel restaurant serving her and her prominent interlocutor Coca Cola in a teapot at the height of Ceaușescu's regime, meant to signal the interlocutor's prestigious position without alerting the other diners (Verdery, 1991).

Despite the extensive state control on international mobility, emigration from Romania during state socialism was not unremarkable. In particular, the ethnic migration of Jews, Germans and Hungarians was the most substantial because it was quietly encouraged by the Party-state. The Former *Securitate* Colonel Pacepa details a 'gentleman's agreement' in his memoir whereby Romanian and Israeli secret services consented to grant Romanian Jews exit visas for Israel in exchange for Israeli investment in Romanian industry, primarily agriculture (1992). Between 1948-1989, an estimate of 270,000 Jews left Romania for Israel (Horváth, 2012). A similar deal was struck with West Germany in 1967, leading to the emigration of nearly 180,000 German ethnics between 1977 and 1989 alone (Horváth, 2012). Outside of these *bona fide* state-approved trades, asylum applications from Romania grew significant during the 1980s, despite the potential repercussions (UNHCR, 2001). The harsh socio-

economic conditions[17] of the 1980s resulted in the six-fold growth of political asylum applications, reaching an annual figure of nearly 15,000 when the regime collapsed in 1989.

Given the extensive measures preventing international mobility during state socialism, the transitional government promptly lessened restrictions on passport control. Those with financial means could easily obtain a passport and cross the border, subject to border-crossing taxes and proof of cash funds (Diminescu, 2009). Numerous Romanians used their newfound mobility to seek asylum in Western European countries, alongside the continued ethnic migration started during Communism. In the early 1990s, Romanians were the second largest group after citizens of former Yugoslavia to apply for asylum in Europe, with 350,000 asylum requests logged by Romanians between 1990-1994, mainly in Germany (Horváth, 2007). In particular, the increase in racist violence, prevalent institutional racism, and targeted abuses towards the Roma led numerous Romanian Romas to apply for asylum in Western European countries. Given the exponential rise in asylum requests from ex-Soviet countries and the fallout of the war in the former Yugoslavia, Western European countries soon deemed Romania a 'safe country' and requests for asylum were refused bar exceptional circumstances. This period was however far from homogenous with Western European countries instating new policies, for example Italy proposed an amnesty in 1998 which led to the legitimisation of over 24,000 Romanian citizens living in the country illegally (Horváth, 2012).

The lessened restrictions on international mobility were, however, not necessarily the only reason for increased emigration. Socio-economic and political factors influencing emigration and life in Romania during Communism impacted how and why mass immigration became 'a major social phenomenon of the post-Communist period' (Horváth, 2012:205, my translation). Highly-qualified young emigrants pursued long-term if not permanent residence in various European countries, and in the USA and Canada, amounting to Romania's first significant 'brain drain' (Sandu, 2005). This 'brain drain' was followed by the migration of so-called 'unskilled' workers from rural areas engaged in temporary migration, from 'suitcase commerce' realised through regular cross-border travel to stints of work on the black markets of Italy or Spain (Bleahu, 2004, 2007; Sandu, 2005, 2010; Sandu *et al.*, 2005). Faced with the rapid privatisation, unemployment and inflation of the 1990s and early 2000s, these 'pioneers' of Romanian migration started travelling to and looking for work in different countries in Western Europe (Sandu, 2010).

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[17] For example, the decree outlawing abortion in 1966 led to an exponential growth of live births, popularly known as *Decreței* ('decree babies'), who came to adulthood in the 1980s and 1990s when limited housing, employment and education was available to them. This set of circumstances meant that migration – whether before or after 1989 – slowly became one of the only viable options for survival for young people without many prospects at a time of economic and social upheaval (Horváth, 2012).

Returning to Europe – are we there yet?

These 'pioneers' established communities in countries of migration after Romania joined the Schengen zone in 2002, which allowed Romanians to travel visa-free to member countries (but not to the UK and Ireland) up to ninety days in the space of six months. Despite its touristic purpose, Romanians used this change to engage in informal work abroad, especially in neighbouring countries and further afield into Germany, Italy, or Spain (Diminescu, 2009). The increase in emigration was generally met with enthusiasm by the Romanian state, and managing the *diaspora*[18] became a significant point on the political agenda as a source of electoral support, as well as financial and social remittances. As emigration rates tripled, the Romanian state created institutions to manage emigration, such as the Office for Labour Force Migration in 2002 that oversaw bilateral agreements with Western European countries looking to recruit Romanian workers (Horváth, 2012). These formal structures were often bypassed by the establishment of a 'culture of migration' (Horváth, 2008) linking social networks of kinship, acquaintances and neighbours in Romania and in countries of migration. As Marcel's example illustrates, working abroad became a rite of passage where a stint of manual labour in Italy served as a test of independence for many Romanian young men. Working *la negru*, as in Marcel's case, relied on help from other Romanians who acted as guides for carpooling to Italy, finding work and accommodation once arrived, and facilitating return travel to Romania. Similar circulatory migration patterns became well-established after 2002, linking villages in Romania with budding social networks providing housing, employment, and advice in countries of migration, primarily Italy (Bleahu, 2007; Anghel, 2008; Cingolani, 2009; Vlase, 2013b) and Spain (Hartman, 2008; Elrick and Ciobanu, 2009; Șerban and Voicu, 2010).

In 2007, Romania's accession to the European Union alongside Bulgaria served as the start of a 'new migration regime' (Horváth, 2012:203) as Romanian citizens could travel to and work in other EU countries without a visa. Sandu (2010) describes a 'moderate' increase in migration after EU accession, growing from 2,2 million in 2006 to 2,7 million in 2007, as well as an increase in the migration of professionals, especially in healthcare. Despite their new EU membership, Romanians enjoyed 'only limited access to the category of Europeans' (Fox et al., 2012:690), as numerous EU states[19] implemented restrictions on Romanians' right to work for the maximum time allowed of seven years' after EU accession. In the UK, Romanians were required to have a work permit until 2014, which pushed many into self-employment and informal, often low-skilled work (Boboc *et al.*, 2012). Despite

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[18] *Diaspora* is an emic, rather than academic term in this thesis. Romanians abroad are routinely referred to as the *diaspora* by legislators, politicians, mass media, and other citizens in Romania.

[19] Alongside the UK, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Malta also imposed restrictions on Romanians and Bulgarians' right to work for seven years after EU accession. Greece, Hungary, Denmark and Portugal upheld these restrictions for two years, while Italy and Ireland kept them for five years. Spain first introduced restrictions only for two years, but then reintroduced them in 2011 for Romanians after a large-scale migration to the country.

these restrictions, Romanians continued to emigrate in large numbers, primarily to the familiar destinations of Italy and Spain. Following the financial crisis of 2008, those in low-skilled, easy-hire-easy-fire jobs were the first to lose their jobs in Italy and Spain which were severely hit by the crisis and eventually moved to Germany and the UK (Anghel *et al.,* 2019). In Romania, drastic austerity measured laid mounting pressures, especially on state employees, making many Romanians search for work in Western European countries like the UK.

Echoing Marcel's enigmatic turn of phrase, England represented the 'last hope' for many Romanians after their previous migrations to countries such as Italy and Spain. The removal of labour market restrictions for Romanians in the UK in 2014 marked a mass migration to the country. It is estimated that nearly 400,000 Romanians resided in the UK in 2018, having more than doubled since 2014 to become the second most-common non-British nationality[20] after Poles in 2019 (ONS, 2019). This increase in Romanian migration to the UK was met with racialised tropes in British media and public discourse. Before the lifting of work restrictions, both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers routinely described Romanians as a single group related to crime and anti-social behaviour (Vicol and Allen, 2014). Channel 4's documentary 'The Romanians are coming' capitalised on similar tropes, portraying Romanians as open to do anything to survive, including crime, scamming and benefit fraud. These racialised portrayals of Romanians and other Eastern Europeans laid the foundation for the Brexit campaign centred on immigration (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). Romanians were heavily targeted by politicians supporting the Leave campaign as criminal or abusing welfare benefits. On a local radio broadcast, Nigel Farage memorably proclaimed that he would be worried if his neighbours were Romanians. After the Brexit referendum, the UK government introduced the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS), meant to legitimise the status of EU citizens living in the UK before the UK left the EU. Many of my participants received a right to remain in the UK under the EUSS – whether time-limited 'pre-settled status' or permanent 'settled status'. After 1 January 2021, the UK introduced a points-based immigration system applicable to Romanians and other EU citizens, who could only visit the country for up to six months as a 'standard visitor' without a right to work and otherwise required a visa for any employment (Newson, 2021). In the first six months of 2021, Romanians were the EU citizens most likely to be stopped at the border and refused entry (Cuibus, 2023).[21] This trend continued and Romanians amounted to nearly half of all EU citizens stopped at the border in the first half of 2023.

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[20] In this study, although Romanians were the second most common non-British nationality, Romania was only the fourth most common country of birth in the UK, after India, Poland, and Pakistan. This discrepancy may show that although Romanians were a significant migrant population in the UK, but that not as many Romanians obtain British citizenship as their Indian or Pakistani counterparts who are part of older and larger migrant groups in the UK.

[21] While EU citizens like Romanians do not need a visa to enter the UK, they can be stopped and denied entry by border control officers. Officers have the discretion to do so if they believe that the EU citizen in question is likely to break the conditions of their entry, for example by working without a visa.

The combined effects of Brexit and the pandemic led numerous Romanians to return to Romania, especially during and after 2020, mirroring an overall decrease in EU migration to the UK (The Migration Observatory, 2019; Sumption, 2021; Sumption *et al.,* 2024). Between 2016-2020, the Migration Observatory estimated that net migration from EU2 countries (Bulgaria and Romania) fell by 40% (Cuibus, 2023).[22] Both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Romanians returned home, whether temporarily or permanently. A report issued by the Ministry for Interior quoted that an estimate of 250,000 Romanians returned in the first months of the pandemic (Recorder, 2020). However, the number of Romanians in the UK remains significant. By the end of December 2023, Romanians made over 1,7 million applications to the EUSS, the highest number of applications for all EU citizens (UK Government, 2024a).[23] This partial return or decrease in migration to the UK is beyond the scope of this thesis, as I did not follow any Romanians' who returned to Romania permanently. My participants travelled to Romania temporarily during the pandemic from a few weeks to six months (Cîrstea, forthcoming). However, this decline in migration to the UK was echoed in the disappointment most of my participants expressed about their lives in the UK and about the promises of Westward mobility more generally. Marcel's disdain with formal education showcases a wider disappointment for the Romanians I met, and which I set out to explore in this thesis. The promises of Westward mobility and of Europeanness more broadly – financial gain, independence, meritocracy, politeness – became undone during many of my participants' experiences of mobility. These failed hopes echo the promises of Europeanness and modernisation through transition that similarly failed to show up for Romanians during the three decades after state socialism. In particular, recent migration to the UK – and in the particular context of Covid and Brexit that underlines this thesis – showed the cracks in the promises of Westward mobility.

The future – An imagined return to the homeland, or 'England is not Europe'

On an afternoon in May 2021, I was looking after little Magdalena when Marcel came into the living room and introduced me to Dan, one of the Romanian men renting cars from him. Dan quickly sat down for an impromptu interview while Marcel made calls about his car's MOT. As Marcel took the baby next door and talked loudly on the phone with local garages, Dan eloquently recounted his experiences of mobility. He first left home for university in Bucharest where he studied accounting before dropping out and going to Spain for work. In his early twenties, Dan travelled to Spain with two friends, whom he nostalgically described as 'young explorers'. The three young men did not speak Spanish and struggled to find work at first, but Dan still relished that time as 'the most beautiful period in my life'.

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[22] This drop was less abrupt than that of European countries who joined the EU earlier such as Poland (known as EU-8), which saw a decrease of 126% in net migration to the UK between 2016-2020 (Cuibus, 2023).

[23] These figures come with significant caveats. For example, they include Romanians who may have applied for the EUSS and subsequently returned to Romania, as well as not covering those who did not apply.

With help from other Romanians, he found work in a delivery company, as a waiter, and in a warehouse. When the financial crisis hit in 2008, opportunities for work quickly dried up.

After being unemployed for almost a year, Dan decided to return to Romania, a period he associated with stress, isolation and depression at 'the failure of not making it' since he 'left with many dreams, many hopes'. For a few years, Dan worked different jobs in Romania – in a mini-market, at a bank selling mortgages, and in a casino as a bodyguard. When his sister asked him to come to the UK a few years later, Dan was quick to accept since Romania 'no longer offered me what I wanted'. When he first arrived in the UK, Dan struggled once again with learning a new language and getting used to life in London. He mostly explained it as:

> Well, you know, *England is not Europe*. It is totally, totally different from life on the continent. If we start from the fact that they drive on the other side [of the road] to a different mentality, a totally different lifestyle, yeah, everything is somehow, *anapoda*, in your head. […] Even now that I have been here for six years, we still see things differently. I don't think I could ever integrate here 100%. […] Well, first, communication between people. They are very cold people compared to us, I mean, I don't think that this fake, polite smile is characteristic for Romanians, but you see it here everyday. There are things, I don't know what example to give you, but you *feel it when you're in the moment*. Cultural differences, not necessarily that people themselves are mean or cold.

During his six years in the UK, Dan had gone through a range of jobs, from leafletting and agency work when he first arrived to working as a supervisor in a supermarket. At the time of our interview, he settled on driving for Uber using the car he rented from Marcel. Dan preferred Uber driving because it came with a significant income and freedom to work as much or as little as he wanted. Despite his comfortable life in the UK, Dan was vehement about returning to Romania. I was surprised by Dan's conviction, since he earlier brushed off my questions about Romanian politics or news because 'nothing ever changes'. Since nothing ever changed, I asked, how come he wanted to return to Romania? Dan laughed and explained at length:

> I think you forgot to ask me a question – why did I leave Romania?
>
> I left because of [a lack of] opportunities, in terms of material and personal development, as a human being, to see more. I think that, generally, people make life as they want it. The society where you live matters, but you can slip through it, kind of. Of course you don't like parts of society, when it comes to safety, politics, and lifestyle.
>
> Yes, I do not mind returning home even if things don't work as they should. **On your own parcel of land and in your own little hut, you can do what you think is right.** Unfortunately, nothing will change in Romania. Nothing will get better. We are **a colony which, after the 90s, was snatched by the more powerful nations in the world and unfortunately, we do not have a word to say in Romania, like many**

other countries from the old Soviet bloc, the old Communist countries. The ***mentality from before the 90s*** is deeply rooted in us. Fear continues to rule between us, in people, and that's hard to change. Even if you see that people are more free than before, they're still brought up according to this fear, to not say something and risk upsetting someone, because they're so-and-so's son.

And there's many injustices in Romania, abuses and all sorts of things that won't change, there's no way. But if ***the story is told by the goat, the wolf is always guilty***, you know?

<center>***</center>

In his impromptu interview, Dan echoed many of the themes and historical processes unpacked in this chapter so far. His experiences in Spain mirrored how Romanian migration to Mediterranean countries during the 2000s meant both independence and reliance on an informal support system of friends and acquaintances, which brought camaraderie for young men like Dan despite working in precarious, low-paid jobs. Faced with returning to Romania after the 2008 financial crisis, as many other Romanians at the time, Dan needed to cope with the 'failure of not making it' where his hopes for 'material and personal development' through Westward mobility came undone. Dan's narrative also alludes to the postsocialist transformation and its remnants in Romanians' lives, such as the 'mentality from before the 90s'. However, what I unpack in this section goes beyond these parallels. It is Dan's vernacular political claims that I explore in the final section of this chapter, best summarised by his curious statement that 'England is not Europe' (*Anglia nu e Europa*).

At first, Dan's claims could be understood as a manifestation of a kind of 'migrant' cultural intimacy, according to which social and cultural norms in the UK feel *anapoda* (the closest translation being 'out of sorts' or 'topsy-turvy'). Michael Herzfeld defines cultural intimacy as 'the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (2016:3 [1997]). Migration may add yet another layer to this common sociality derived from mostly disapproving of the cultural and social norms found in the 'host' society. Dan explained how British politeness felt cold or unfamiliar, and how such differences had an affective dimension – something that one could 'just feel in the moment'. While these experiences are key to understanding Dan's and other Romanians' daily lives, they also provide an insight into their political ambitions attached to their mobility. These political ambitions are illustrated by Dan's conviction about returning to Romania even if 'nothing ever changes'. I was struck by this statement since most Romanians I met during my pilot study, in the ethnographic record, or in my own migration experience, often used the narrative that 'nothing ever changes' as the reason why they do *not* wish to return to Romania. Although this statement does not determine whether Dan will eventually return to Romania or not, it is telling about his political aspirations. To substantiate his claim that 'nothing ever changes' in Romania and his desired return,

Dan drew on a number of concepts, which I separate below for the purposes of analysis although they remain interlinked in his narrative.

First, Dan referenced the 'mentality from before the 90s' to explain a lack of change in Romania, using the example of nepotism and the implicit social hierarchy underpinning it. Dan attributed a lack of political agency and predisposition for oligarchic rule to Romanians as a national characteristic. Similar claims have been documented in the ethnographic record. Filippo Zerilli wrote about comparable references used by his Romanian interlocutors to explain corruption as 'cultural heritage devices' or 'flexible rhetoric devices' (2013:316). Combining historical facts with common stereotypes, these 'devices' attributed the prevalence of corruption to an external 'Other' – whether the Communist legacy as per Dan's example above or older historical references to Phanariot or Ottoman rule. At the same time, these devices also remained closely linked to national history and identity, thus rendering corruption a symbol of Romanianness (Zerilli, 2005). In her study of three white-collar workplaces in Bucharest in the early 2000s, Monica Heintz similarly documented claims about the 'Romanian mentality' linked with "'balkanism', 'orientalism', and a lack of 'civilisation'" (2006:18). Like Zerilli's accounts of corruption, Romanian identity became morally fraught, an obstacle to be overcome by dedicated neoliberal denizens. Heintz's participants were instead drawn to the ideal type of capitalist work ethic they associate with the West, for example working in a hierarchical environment premised on hard work and devoid of bribes and nepotism. Not unique to Romania, these statements can be said to amount to 'postsocialist Eastern Europe's own variant of Orientalism', as Elizabeth Dunn phrased it in her monograph about a fruit processing factory in Poland where state socialism was repeatedly invoked as an 'antithesis to new flexible capitalism' (2004:92). Outside of the strict postsocialist sphere, as Maria Todorova attested nearly three decades ago, the 'Balkan mentality' associated with moral dubiousness represents one of the 'most abused mythologemes in journalistic, and, generally, in popular discourse' (2009:5 [1997]), one which arguably continues to define the region when compared to the broader European space to this day.

Going beyond Romania's relationship with its recent past, Dan's narrative also reflected on Romania's relationship to Europe and the image of Europe that many of my participants built in their hopes for their mobility. His claims that 'England is not Europe' draws our attention to the promises of Europeanness that have a strong hold on Romanians' history and imaginations of the future. Aspirations to Europe as a site of modernity and civilisation date back to over two centuries ago – what Vintilă Mihăilescu described as the 'long-lasting dream of "Western modernity", begun about two centuries ago, on the eve of the Romanian nation' (2014:31). Historians document how political elites and intellectuals alike strived to assert Romania's Europeanness since the 1800s, refuting the dominance of the Russian and Ottoman empires, instead posing as 'an outpost of Latin culture in the East' (Gallagher, 2005:21). Laying the foundation for the country's independence, ruling land-owning elites (*boieri*) unleashed a programme of Europeanisation in the 19th century that included, for example, replacing the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin one, adopting a new Constitution in 1866 modelled on the Belgian one,

or using a French blueprint for the main institutions of the newly-formed Romanian state. The *boieri* also set store in foreign-born monarchs such as Carol of Hohenzollern to secure recognition in Europe for the newly-formed Romanian state. Numerous Romanian intellectuals at the time studied at universities in Western Europe, bringing back with them the words, wardrobes, tastes and customs that in turn shaped the cultural production of the middle-classes and earned Bucharest its cherished title of 'Little Paris' (Djuvara, 2016).[24]

The First and Second World War significantly impacted Romania's relationship to Europe, as a continued source of support for the nationalist cause. Joining the Allies late in 1916 after initial neutrality, Romania's territory doubled overnight to include Transylvania and Banat (from Hungary), Bucovina (from Austria) and Basarabia (from Russia). These territorial wins coincided with the establishment of 'Greater Romania' (*România Mare*) in 1918, what historian Tom Gallagher called 'the holy grail of Romanian nationalism' (2005:28). However, before and during the Second World War, many Romanian intellectuals switched their support for the West to support for Nazi Germany, in an effort to motivate an ethnically Romanian state-building and paving the way for the fascist dictatorship led by Ion Antonescu. While these events warrant an extensive discussion that goes beyond the scope of this chapter, Romania's relationship to Europe as a site of promise continued during the turbulent first half of the twentieth century, mainly a source of support for state-building (whether territorially, militarily, or ideologically). Even after the Communist Party took power in 1947, Europe continued to be desired, for example through the dissident consumption of imported goods as explored earlier in this chapter.

These historical influences of aspiring to Europe continued to unfold during the postsocialist transformation described earlier in this chapter, especially during the process of accession to the European Union. If we return to Tod Hartman's 'utopia of impossible fullness' with which this chapter started (2007), EU accession stood in for a life of economic security, political stability and less fragile livelihoods. Multiple polls and surveys proclaimed Romanians the most pro-European electorate, with over 71% of Romanians reporting that the EU membership was a good thing in 2008 compared to 49% of the average responses in all surveyed EU member states at the time (Eurobarometer, 2023). Historian Tom Gallagher calls the decade between 1997-2007 one of 'pseudo-Europeanisation' (2009:11) (complemented by the orientalising term of 'Euro-Balkanism') during which the political elite in Bucharest adopted 'a range of rituals and initiatives which were essentially nothing but public relations gimmicks' (2009:6) meant to please Brussels. This decade saw old political structures remain in power and setting the foundations of a market economy that was key to successful accession, followed by an extreme rollback of the state without any virtual safety nets, as outlined earlier in this chapter. By 2007, the Romanian state controlled a smaller proportion of the country's economic activity than the British

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[24] Some significant opposition to Western influences did exist, for example, literary critic and commentator Titu Maiorescu memorably deemed the new Western-inspired institutions in Romania 'forms without substance' (*forme fără fond*).

state, an achievement welcomed by the EU who envisioned that the creation of a market economy would go hand in hand with the establishment of democratic rule (Gallagher, 2009). The EU's dedication to rapid privatisation without paying attention to the political conditions led to unemployment, large emigration and a shrinking of the labour market, at the same time pushing entire private domains into the hands of predatory elites untouched by the public bodies meant to regulate their dealings. Judicial reforms were often perfunctory, plying the rule of law to the interests of privileged players. As such, EU communiques labelled Romania 'to be behind the Central European candidates and was engaged in a process of catch-up' (Gallagher, 2009:7).

This rhetoric of catching up crystallised quickly in public opinion in Romania. Celebrated historian Lucian Boia dedicated a whole volume to the idea of Romania as 'other' (*altfel*), claiming that the country's modernisation was incomplete and that some citizens were yet to join 'modernity', a term which he frequently equated with Western modernity throughout his book:

> Romania's problem is that it has exited traditional society, but a good part of its inhabitants are yet to enter into modernity, not just Western modernity. It is in an undefined state of "intermediary". (Boia, 2013:122, my translation)

Boia went so far as to claim that most of Romania's celebrated artists simply copied ideas from their Western European counterparts, repeatedly reinforcing the idea that the history of the country showed an 'impressive delay' (2013:35) that could hardly be shaken off. As anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu later remarked, the fact that the ideas of Boia's book were so well received by the public showed the strength of the 'othering' of the country by its inhabitants (2017:20, my translation). Dan's claims must therefore be situated within this ample social phenomenon and its historical roots. Drawing on his experiences of mobility, Dan paralleled the 'mentality from the before the 90s' with the 'material and personal development, as a human being, to see more' that he sought in Spain and later in the UK.

Despite the historical, ethnographic and political implications of this 'othering', the experiences of my participants bring an unexpected change in this narrative. Dan is fervently hoping to return to Romania despite his claims about the 'mentality from before the 90s' and the conviction that 'nothing ever changes'. Among my participants, Dan's narratives are not alone. For instance, Camelia outlined at the beginning of this chapter how she foresaw 'dark times ahead' for the UK and argued that Romanians must return home to make use of their 'gifts from God', such as ingenuity and resourcefulness, and to combat problems in Romanian society. These experiences of disenchantment with Westward mobility and with the defeated, self-orientalising perspectives of Romania are of course not entirely surprising as a shift in public opinion about the European Union has been emergent among Romanians and other Eastern Europeans. In 2022, when asked if Romania's membership in the EU was a good thing, only 46% agreed, compared to 62% of the average responses in all surveyed EU member states (Eurobarometer, 2023). This newfound disenchantment with European membership has not escaped anthropologists' attention. As Dzenovska and Kurtović recently outlined, post-Cold War

political liberalism often amounts to 'more faith than reason', since 'the discursive practices that went into the making of liberal democratic polities after socialism have failed to address forms of dispossession caused by its companion ideology of nationalism' (2018: no pagination). This showed up, for example, in Katy Fox's ethnography of shepherds and peasants in Romania's Carpathian Mountains. Europe emerged as 'an ambivalent guest' (Fox, 2011:3) for these rural Romanians, both as a source of hope and wealth and a disenchantment with the everyday realities of EU reforms. For her participants, EU membership involved programmes of rural development reliant on audits, training and integration of new animal welfare or environmental standards. However, these programmes did not enable all farmers the opportunity to participate, being diffused through faulty institutions and local patronage networks, leading some farmers to distance themselves from and resist EU-driven initiatives.

With this in mind, Dan's claim that 'England is not Europe' can perhaps be taken a step further, beyond his examples of cultural difference between England and Europe. It instead points to the fact that migration to England was based on a set of historical and political aspirations towards Europe for Romanians that are slowly becoming undone. It is these aspirations that I seek to unpack in this thesis, showing how Romanians became disenchanted with the outcomes and promises of their mobility across Europe. Dan's claims provide a useful illustration of these complex claims in his vernacular postcolonial critique. In his explanation, Romania was nothing but a 'colony snatched by powerful nations' whose political agency was denied by its low rank in global hierarchies. Despite his self-orientalising claims about the 'mentality from before the 90s', Dan reflected on geopolitical power imbalances through the rhetorical statement that 'if the story is told by the goat, the wolf is always guilty'. The wolf in this allegory is Romania, which Dan posited had been villainised by the 'goat', those external, powerful countries that turned the country into what he called 'a colony'. In this short statement, Dan illustrated how his return to Romania was not as counter-intuitive as it may seem, rooted in a complex geopolitical and historical context.

Dan's imagined return also revolved around having a 'parcel of land' and 'a little hut'. These ambitions of private property ownership are not uncommon for the Romanians I met in London, as most of them worked hard to buy land and build a house back 'home', as per Camelia and Marcel's example at the start of this chapter. Holding on to a piece of land or a house represents an important pursuit, one which protects against the indeterminacy of hope for a 'better future' with which I started this chapter. It may be that holding on to land or a house offers Romanians like Camelia and Marcel a physical foothold at 'home' that may change at a slower pace than the broader political and socio-economic changes affecting Romania as a whole. Investments in a house may safeguard a potential future return.

What is interesting beyond these material aspirations is the libertarian point of view that accompanied the parcel of land in Dan's narrative. Content that he, like all Romanians, did not have a stake in the country's development, Dan dreamt of a future return defined by independence, one where 'you can do what you think is right'. These very same ideas of independence were what my participants came up against during their time in London. As I have endeavoured to show above, Westward mobility

came with promises of independence, financial gain, and freedom for many of my participants and the countless other Romanians who went to work abroad over the past three decades. While in London, these expectations became undone as they discovered that their mobile livelihoods were in fact premised on interdependence and on the favours, care and help provided by other Romanians.

Rooted in the complex historical and political context I have explained throughout this chapter, this thesis seeks to explore and understand claims similar to Dan's in which Romanians become disenchanted with the hopes and outcomes of their mobility to the UK. Their discontent sometimes manifests in their self-orientalising portrayals of other Romanians, such as Dan's claims about the 'mentality from before the 90s'. However, the discontent I found among Romanians in London also takes a surprising political nature, as they turned to support a new, far-right party in the Romanian Parliamentary elections of 2020. Examining their discontent within their households, families, friendships, and political allegiances, this thesis outlines how Romanianness receives a new facet for my participants in London, one that has already been seized and mobilised by far-right political parties.

Chapter 2: 'It's about her being a modern woman, independent!': Romanian women balancing gender, duty and work

A few days after I moved in, I woke up to loud noises as Camelia and Marcel struggled to get their two older children to school on time. The Boians had recently returned from Romania so the children were not yet used to the early mornings. After a healthy dose of shouting, Marcel strapped them into their car seats and drove off. He would later complete an airport drop off and some Uber rides, only returning home later that afternoon. Once the children were gone, Camelia and I tidied the house and took turns checking on sleeping baby Magdalena. I helped chop vegetables as Camelia patiently skimmed off the foam from boiling a large chicken destined for soup. Around noon, two Romanian women arrived at the front door. Hailing from near Camelia's native village, they spoke with the region's characteristic accent. In her early twenties, Denisa was young and slim, smiling broadly to show a crooked front tooth. Dressed in a bright sports top and black leggings, she stood behind Violeta, a middle-aged woman with short jet black hair and bright blue eyes. Violeta was Denisa's boyfriend's mother. Camelia introduced me and the two women sat down on the worn-out leather sofas in the Boians' living room. Before sitting down, Violeta set aside a clear plastic sack full of used clothes gifted to her by the 'lady' she worked for as a cleaner in Central London. Camelia served the women sweet, milky coffees and thanked Violeta for the clothes.

After we finished our coffees, Camelia donned a black-and-gold apron and filled the dinner table with combs and hair products. When she first arrived in the UK, Camelia started a hairdressing course in the hope of improving her English. She enjoyed it so much that she continued year by year, until she reached the sixth-form course she was studying during the year I spent in her home. On that late summer day, the two women were one of the first 'girls' (*fete*) who called on Camelia for her hairdressing services, to borrow her own turn of phrase. Camelia started with Violeta who was unhappy with her black box dye and wanted a vibrant red instead. Violeta sat on a kitchen chair in the middle of the living room, while Denisa rocked baby Magdalena on her shins, back and forth, until the baby fell asleep. The women chatted about the Boians' recent visit to Romania, exchanging gossip about family members and acquaintances. Soon the conversation turned to the christening party that Marcel and Camelia had attended the previous night because Marcel's sister was the godmother of the child in question. Although still exhausted from their travels, the Boians saw it as their 'duty' as family members of the godparents to attend even if they hardly knew the baby's parents. Violeta was curious about the party, quizzing Camelia about who was there. Both her and Denisa exclaimed in shock upon finding out that Marcel's other sister who also lived in London did not attend. Violeta teased that they should have invited them, since her and her husband would have gladly attended 'from Camelia and Marcel's side'. Camelia sheepishly apologised, explaining it had completely slipped her mind to extend an invitation. She quickly changed the subject to how at baby Magdalena's christening earlier that summer,

Marcel's sister only gave them £150, barely enough to cover the cost of the set restaurant menus. The two women once again appeared outraged, exchanging their own tales of family members behaving badly.

As the women talked, Camelia's deft fingers wrapped Violeta's hair in shiny tinfoil and brushed it with bleach and dye. The smell of hair dye filled the living room, so we opened the large patio doors to let in some fresh air. The conversation turned to child-rearing, their own idyllic childhoods in Romania, the beauty of the Romanian countryside, and complaints about their husbands. As we waited for the dye to take, Camelia trimmed the ends of Denisa's long black hair before washing Violeta's hair in the family bathroom upstairs. Just before they left, Violeta slipped £40 into Camelia's apron pocket. As I helped her sweep up the hair, Camelia appeared pleased with the money she had earned and quickly arranged a few more appointments for the following week. She then turned her laptop on and checked her college email, and within an hour Marcel had returned home with their eldest child.

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The few hours I spent with Camelia, Violeta and Denisa provide a good illustration of the topics I set out to explore not only in this chapter, but in this thesis as a whole. Before starting my fieldwork, I planned to research how work and labour become intersected with the norms of belonging for Romanians in London. In line with the literature and my pilot study, I expected to ask about and observe everything from paid work to odd cash-in-hand jobs and side hustles. Certainly, these experiences were part of my participants' narratives and experiences, but pandemic restrictions meant that I had limited ethnographic insight into these practices. While I discovered more about Marcel's business and Camelia's hairdressing, I struggled to gain an insight into my other participants' work. Although I was struck by the fact that I could not observe work as I had imagined, a different kind of labour crept its way into my fieldnotes, as illustrated in the episode above. The competing types of labour performed by Romanian women soon coloured my understanding of work in a way I could not have anticipated beforehand, deriving from but not limited to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Keir Martin, Ståle Wig, and Sylvia Yanagisako recently wrote (2021), the Covid-19 pandemic showed the interdependence at the heart of human existence, and the way in which certain dependencies are acknowledged, even celebrated, while others are hidden or rendered inexistent. Paying attention to these interdependencies offers an insight into how social inequalities are created and reproduced. Gendered difference is a key area where interdependence was made more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Study after study showed how women bore the heavier burden during the pandemic when it came to childcare responsibilities and household work (Bear *et al*., 2020; Mooi-Reci and Risman, 2021; Yavorsky *et al*., 2021; Elhinnawy *et al*., 2023). Similar insights applied to the lives of the Romanian women I met. While many Romanian men continued to work in person in sectors like transport or construction, Romanian women's employment was more severely affected by the pandemic. Whether in cleaning, retail, or hospitality, the businesses where they worked promptly shut

their doors. Women in self-employment and informal work also saw their services unwanted overnight. This decline in paid work came hand in hand with an increase in care and work inside their homes. When both private and state-funded schools and nurseries closed, childcare was relocated to the household. Co-tenants out of work also stayed home, enhancing the drudgery of cleaning and cooking. Illness needed to be treated within the household as hospital admissions were reserved for serious COVID-19 cases. Faced with these restrictions, Romanian women devised clever workarounds to seek support from one another. When one of her friends got fined by the police after their neighbours reported visitors, Camelia was reluctant to drop off her children for a playdate. She favoured friends nearby who were on good terms with their neighbours. While driving, she kept an eye out for police cars and stored shopping bags in the boot, should she be asked where she was going. Yet, Camelia continued to rely on sporadic childcare opportunities that provided her with some time to write her college assignments or dye hair for some extra cash. Like Camelia, many of my participants relied on trusted friends and family to make ends meet. They carefully balanced the risk of being caught breaking pandemic restrictions and juggling their many responsibilities. However, the account I build here is more than an illustration of gendered norms during the pandemic. Situating it in the literature on gender and postsocialism and the (limited) literature on Romanian women's migration, I show how the gendered labour I observed during my fieldwork shows many continuities that push it beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was following the social ties woven by Romanian women, and by Camelia *par excellence*, that led me to consider the wider webs of favours, duty, and obligation I unpack in this thesis. Each of these processes relied on gendered labour as I show about kinship (in Chapter 3) or about helping other Romanians (in Chapter 4). With this in mind, I consciously start this thesis by unpacking the disproportionate work that Romanian women invest in sustaining the networks I explore in the rest of this thesis. The episode above proves helpful to bring these topics together. It illustrates how Camelia combined multiple and competing responsibilities – childcare, cooking and cleaning for her family, her friendships with other Romanian women, her kinship duties, her college course, and her informal work as a hairdresser. Violeta and Denisa's visit to the Boians' house similarly straddled different relationships and went beyond dichotomies of paid/unpaid or formal/informal work. Rather than simply paying Camelia a set price, Violeta gifted her used clothes that Camelia later shared with other Romanian women (this author included). The gift was not considered enough to warrant no payment, so Violeta rushed to stuff some money in Camelia's apron on the way out. Placing the money in the apron likened it to a tip or a gift, rather than payment *per se*. Alongside these economic exchanges, the sharing of gossip and the playing out of different norms of duty and obligation similarly underscored the women's visit, so much so that it becomes impossible to separate the two. The ease with which the women exchanged updates shows their place in the 'transnational social field' (Glick Schiller and Levitt, 2004) as their discussion covered friends and relatives in both Romania and London. They took great joy in debating and exclaiming outrage at Marcel's sister's perceived failures to abide by her 'duty' to attend the christening the night before their visit. The expectations of kinship soon blended in

with those of friendship when Violeta scolded Camelia for not inviting her and her husband to the christening. A complex mixture of gendered work similarly underscored Denisa and Violeta's visit. Camelia and I cooked and cleaned before their arrival, but the work did not stop once they set foot through the door. The women became willing participants as they took turns in helping to look after baby Magdalena and shared the used clothes with both myself and Camelia.

In this chapter, I set out to explore how gender, work and duty unfolded in the lives of Romanian women in London. Rather than focus on paid employment alone as I anticipated before my fieldwork, I show how Romanian women creatively weaved different strands of work and education to make ends meet in London. This focus on gendered labour allows me to lay the foundations for how women like Camelia built intricate networks with other Romanian women, and by extension, with other Romanian households in London. These practices reflect gendered norms in Romania, but also hold important lessons for understanding the lives of women on the move. Rather than a mere illustration of gendered norms, the practices I outline in this chapter show how Romanian women in London both demarcated and reinforced gendered norms and practices, while also at times resisting and upending these in their pursuit of education and of a better life for themselves and their children.

Haircuts and prams

Only a few days after the above visit, I awoke early enough to savour a quiet coffee before the rest of the household woke up. Promptly after breakfast, Camelia and I started cleaning the house before a Romanian woman arrived for a haircut together with her little girl and her baby. The woman was slim and had a wide smile but was clearly exhausted by the six-month-old baby that constantly vied for her attention. She left the sleeping baby in a pram and sat down on a kitchen chair for Camelia to trim her long, thick brown hair. Camelia wrapped a golden plastic cape around the woman's shoulders, and started her work, but not before setting out a plate of sweet treats for the children. Marcel worked in the same room, talking on the phone loudly amid the screams from the children and the constant clipping of scissors. Camelia's children soon took the little girl to play outside, leading her to the plastic swings at the back of the garden. Camelia knew this client well since they both attended the same Romanian church. She patiently listened to the woman's stories, cutting her long hair with precise moves. Camelia finished the wet cut and told the woman to wait so they can see how the hair will look when it dries. In the meantime, Camelia started cutting the little girl's hair who was terrified by the prospect of a haircut. The resulting noise woke up the baby in the pram, who in turn woke baby Magdalena. Camelia finished cutting the little girl's hair and stopped to feed baby Magdalena, where she was joined by the Romanian woman who also needed to feed her baby. As soon as baby Magdalena was full, Camelia put her down and finished cutting the lady's hair. They were interrupted by the children climbing on a fence in the garden, and Camelia quickly stepped outside to scold them. I offered to keep an eye on the children,

and in an effort to soothe them to sleep, began clumsily rocking both prams. Camelia finished styling the lady's hair, charging a mere £15 for both haircuts.

This price surprised me since the two haircuts had taken over two hours of work, and involved juggling children, cajoling the little girl to accept a hair cut, and providing the children with snacks. I asked Camelia about it after the visitors' departure, as she swept up hair and I washed the dishes. Camelia explained that haircutting was profitable for her despite the low price: *I-am luat, nu i-am dat.* ('I *made* some money, I didn't give it away'.). Jobs where she needed to use hairstyling products and colouring were more costly and she earned less money. She added that she would be at home anyway, cooking and cleaning for her family. The woman also brought a plastic sack full of baby clothes for baby Magdalena, which pleased Camelia since she had given away most of her own old baby clothes.

After lunch, Camelia returned a few phone calls to other Romanian women requesting hair cuts. Many women had called to make appointments before Camelia went to Romania earlier in the summer, but as she was heavily pregnant and busy with college exams she had had to decline their requests. She told me about the other women who come to her for hair cuts, who were mainly Romanian but also an *îmbrobodită* (loosely translated as 'bundled-up', a derogatory term used to describe hijab-wearing women). These women preferred coming to get their hair cut with Camelia due to her good craftsmanship and low prices. As a hairdresser, she was attentive and open to feedback, often offering to let the hair dry and touch it up afterwards. She was also patient with the children of her clients and often had her own children entertaining the younger guests.

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Rather than the expensive and glamorous space of hair salons, Camelia's toy-covered home felt familiar and acted as an important space for creating and building relationships between Romanian women. The women gossiped and shared updates about other Romanians, church, or local children's activities. The episode above also provides a good illustration of how Camelia combined childcare, gendered work in the home, and informal work in her everyday life. Rather than neatly separated, these tasks and the work that constituted them were permanently intertwined. Cleaning and tidying the house on this day, as on many other days, became a background activity and a habitual task that Camelia and I undertook to prepare for the clients' arrival and to tidy up after their departure.[25] Childcare emerged as another seemingly habitual activity for the two women and myself. Rather than passive actors, Camelia's children actively engaged in her work, both as recipients and as providers of care, as they helped entertain the little girl. Caring for infants was another key activity in the episode above as Camelia and her client both stopped to feed and comfort their babies. The women supported one another by

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[25] Cleaning was also a general background for our discussions throughout the day. Especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, Camelia and I carried out most of our conversations while washing dishes, peeling potatoes, or picking up stranded toys. During the year I spent in the Boian household, I only sat down for a formal interview with Camelia once.

discussing their experiences of motherhood, providing advice as well as material support in the form of hand-me-down clothes.

Similar to the episode above from Camelia's life, most of the Romanian women I met combined paid, often informal or precarious work (whether cash-in-hand, part-time, or agency work) with gendered labour in the home. The link between gendered labour and waged labour is of course not a new one for feminist thinkers writing about social reproduction. As Silvia Federici explained, the home and housework serve as the 'foundations of the factory system, rather than its 'other'' (2020:2). The drudgery of cleaning, cooking, childcare, and budgeting household finances were common denominators for most of the Romanian women I met. Their male partners seldom contributed to these activities, just as Marcel proved a passive character in the episode above. At the beginning of their time in London, Marcel worked during the day in construction and during the night as a taxi driver. Camelia took it upon herself to do most of the cleaning, cooking, and shopping at that time, supporting Marcel to balance the two jobs. She herself balanced this work with language courses at a nearby college and cash-in-hand work at a pub. Once she fell pregnant with her eldest child, Camelia stopped this kind of paid work and continued to care for the home but started receiving more support from Marcel. Their relationship used to be 'milk and honey' (*lapte și miere)*, with Marcel preparing breakfast in bed or changing her eldest's nappies. Yet, by the time I arrived in the household this had all changed, with Camelia often explaining with frustration: 'It's not that he doesn't know [how to do it], it's that he doesn't want [to do it]' (*Nu e că nu știe, dar că nu vrea*). Although Marcel only worked one job and had more free time than in those first months in London, he seldom helped with household chores. Cooking and cleaning were predominantly done by Camelia, as was childcare. While Marcel had been in control of the finances since the young couple arrived in London, Camelia was now responsible for overseeing the family's budget for food, household goods and essentials like clothing, toiletries, or school uniforms.

While this gendered labour often took its toll, the women I met frequently looked for further work or education outside of the home, refuting the image of the masculine, work-around-the-clock migrant worker. Amalia, a kind woman in her forties whose story I focus on in chapter 4, combined part-time work at a school on weekdays with occasional employment as a wedding server, private cleaning in a number of select patrons' homes, volunteering at a local foodbank, and looking after her two teenage sons and young daughter. Unlike Camelia, Amalia's children were older and her husband led a successful construction company, but she too continued to engage in a wide array of work, straddling the blurry boundary between paid and unpaid carework. Another participant, Simina, who was in her late twenties, combined agency work as a teaching assistant in a school during the week with Saturdays spent informally baby-sitting a young Romanian boy who she grew to care for greatly because he reminded her of her much missed nephew in Romania. Even for women with adult children, this pattern of different strands of work and care continued to shape their lives. Mărioara, a straight-talking beautiful woman in her forties with an adult son, combined self-employed app-based work in cleaning,

cash-in-hand weekly chore runs for an elderly British man, volunteering at a local Romanian charity, and studying for a Bachelor's degree.

Although seemingly mundane, these complex arrangements led me to question the intersection of gender and work in a way I had not anticipated before my fieldwork. Naturally, one might argue that engaging in a complex arrangement of paid and unpaid work is characteristic of leading a precarious life, a lens which has commonly been applied to the study of Eastern European migrants. However, in this chapter, I focus on how these competing responsibilities emerged as a specific gendered practice, shaped by, but not wholly constrained by, the gendered norms and experiences that shaped the lives of the Romanian women I met. By focusing on the in-depth story of Camelia, I aim to illustrate the different strands that are combined in their lives and migration: the expectations placed on women in a postsocialist country, how these travel when women move, and how they are remade anew, reproduced, and at times resisted in London.

Romanian women in the existing migration literature

My focus on these complex labour arrangements is in part derived from the lack of literature devoted to Romanian migrant women and their gendered labour practices, outside of the archetypal figures of the prostitute-cum-trafficking victim and of the *badantă*, the live-in careworker for elderly people in Italy (Andronic, 2007; Vlase, 2013b; Nicolescu, 2021; Țoc and Guțu, 2021). After Romania joined the EU in 2007, Romanians quickly dominated the field of carework in Italy (Ban, 2012). The *badantă* soon became a contested figure in both Romanian and Italian public opinion and press (Bratu, 2014; Mădroane, 2017), particularly scrutinised for leaving her children in the care of their husbands or family members (Pantea, 2011; Piperno, 2012). While the existing literature describes a variety of arrangements, the *badantă*'s work typically involved a lack of legal employment status, long working hours, limited time outside of the home, and stressful, if not traumatic experiences of caring for patrons in ill health. The protagonist in Nicolescu's study of Romanian *badante* described her work as 'house detention' (2021:86) as she was only allowed two outings of up to three hours a week. Besides the exploitative labour conditions, the *badantă* provides an interesting figure for analysis as she both reproduces and transgresses different gendered norms and experiences, such as motherly sacrifice, caring for the elderly, and establishing intimacy. The transnational experiences of these women complicate their gendered experiences, as they send remittances and care for children and kin at home, while also benefiting from a newfound, yet limited independence in Italy. As shown in their case study of Ukrainian domestic workers in Poland, what makes the figure of the migrant careworker compelling for both academic analysis and social and moral debate is their need to balance their traditionally-ascribed role as 'citizen-the carer' with the renewed one of 'citizen-the wage earner', courtesy of migration (Lutz and Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2011:16). In short, the *badante* are not only mothers and

daughters, nor are they only paid careworkers; they must combine all of these responsibilities and stretch them across nation-state borders.

While the context of the *badante*'s work is different from the lives of my participants, two important lessons can be drawn from this literature for my analysis in this chapter. First, these studies showcase how the invisible labour of women can provide a useful lens to understand the performative gender norms at hand and to trace how these are reproduced and resisted on the move, even under the most exploitative circumstances. For example, Nicolescu (2021) wrote about a party organised by the Romanian *badante* in the Italian village of Grano to showcase how these women both reproduced and transgressed gender norms. The main participant in her chapter, Ana, engages in a complex performance of femininity. Rather than only toiling away to send remittances back home, Ana also embodies the 'modern and successful' (2021:99) woman by dressing elegantly, eating out, and socialising during her limited time outside the home and inside the home with the help of social media. Without undermining the exploitative working conditions of the *badante*, Nicolescu (2021) highlighted how their invisibility can be celebrated and showcased their agency in transgressing gender norms present in both Italy and Romania. I find this focus on the invisibility of Romanian women's labour helpful to direct my attention to how their actions both reproduce and transgress gendered norms.

Second, the literature on the *badante* highlights the importance of understanding women's experiences beyond economic motivation and overcoming simple dichotomies often associated with the morally-ladened realms of intimacy, care, and sexuality (Fedyuk, 2011; Keough, 2016). Writing about the contested intimate relationships between Ukrainian *badante* and Italian employers, Fedyuk emphasised how sidestepping the dichotomy of paid/unpaid care and sex can help shed light on the power struggles 'forming migrant women's transnational social fields that cross borders' (2021:39). Rather than trying to ascertain whether paid carework should be associated with sex and romance for women who start relationships with older Italian men, Fedyuk unpacked how Ukrainian women treat these topics strategically in order to best organise their work, their migrant status, their caring obligations, and their emotional needs. The Romanian women I met similarly combine paid and unpaid carework, but this dichotomy obscures the more important aspects of their gendered labour – how they strategically navigated and made sense of these competing responsibilities and the gendered norms behind them. In the literature on *badante* and migrant domestic workers, however, the focus is often on women who are paid to care for someone deemed vulnerable in the 'host' country (whether the elderly or children), in turn asking questions about their own role in transnational caring networks for those considered vulnerable back 'home' (such as children and parents, more on this in the next chapter). Less attention is however granted to the many other roles assumed by women in their everyday lives abroad, whether inside or outside their households, which can be slippery and difficult to trace. This is my intended contribution in this chapter, but not before providing an account of how Romanian women bring gendered norms from Romania and remake them during their mobility.

Making *sarmale*

On a cold day in early November 2020, I spent most of the day with Camelia making Romanian food. The kitchen rang loudly as baby Magdalena cried ferociously with teething pains. However, Camelia was determined to prepare some beloved dishes. Since the family was due to start fasting for Christmas in a weeks time, Camelia had a list of foods she wanted to enjoy until then: *sarmale*, *cozonac*, *chec*, and *șaorma* (the latter to be bought from a nearby Turkish takeaway).[26]

As I stepped into the kitchen, Camelia was already preparing the *sarmale* mix consisting of beef and pork mince, grated onions and carrots, a handful of rice, and spices. She quickly dashed to the garage and brought in two large heads of white cabbage sent over from Romania. Camelia's mother regularly sent her fresh cabbage from Romania, as well as pickled cabbage over the winter since the weather in the UK was too temperamental for pickling barrels of cabbage. The Boians' garage was filled with other goods sent over by Camelia's mother: sacks of potatoes, crates of onions, and miscellaneous jars of jams and pickles. Another essential *sarmale* ingredient also appeared – grapevine leaves. Growing up, Camelia helped her mother make *sarmale* with grapevine leaves, which are cheaper and more forgiving to unexperienced fingers than cabbage leaves. Camelia's mother sent dried vine leaves to London, carefully rolled and stacked into repurposed soda bottles and preserved with flaky salt. Marcel's mother sometimes sent her these goods too but she was 'lazier' and failed to pick 'good leaves', Camelia explained showing me a small leaf from a different bottle. Her mother-in-law also favoured taste over convenience, adding maize to the mix to give the leaves a sweeter flavour. The maize was bulky and unsuitable for cooking, adding extra weight to the package that needed to be shipped to London. Camelia therefore preferred her mother's parcels, which she considered to be better quality and better value. She showed me how to roll the meat in the vine leaves and we continued until our fingers scraped the bottom of the blue plastic bowl.

As we prepared a small mountain of *sarmale*, Camelia opened up about her mother who at the time was approaching her sixtieth birthday. The woman worked informally on a day-to-day basis (*cu ziua*) as a agricultural worker in the village from early spring to late autumn. She would wake up at 3 am to get to the fields as soon as daylight broke, then return home around noon when the sun shone the brightest. At home, she would cook, clean, and wash clothes for the large family. Around five in the afternoon, she would return to finish work in the fields in the cooler evening air. She came home to milk the goats and feed the other animals in the household before serving dinner to her family. As long as agricultural work was available, this pattern would continue for days on end, with Camelia's mother going to sleep around midnight. Camelia sighed loudly and explained that she does not know 'how she

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[26] *Sarmale* are cabbage rolls filled with minced meat, *cozonac* is a brioche loaf with a rich walnut filling, *chec* is a loaf of airy sponge cake flavoured with cocoa and vanilla. Besides the proverbial *șaorma* that is usually a street food of spit-fired meat stuffed into a wrap with sauces and chips, these dishes are usually prepared for the holidays in Romania.

can still do it' (*cum mai poate*). She constantly tried to ease her mother's workload by buying her a washing machine and other appliances. Yet, the outgoings were considerable, and the family struggled to make ends meet despite their the many animals and crops they kept for subsistence.

Camelia stepped away to feed baby Magdalena as I started making the *cozonac* dough. I melted butter and sugar in a saucepan filled with milk, adding orange and lemon zest. Camelia reminisced about how her family had made *sarmale* often when she was young, as the dish allows one to make a large quantity of food at once, but *cozonac* was saved as a more expensive treat. Camelia would often cook for her brothers and sisters, and recounted scalding her legs when making *mămăligă*[27] on an open fire when she was 7. I noted how that was only one year older than Camelia's eldest, who at the time was busy with the many activities her mother scheduled for her on Saturdays, such as gymnastics or singing lessons.

Caring for others from a young age was a common thread in Camelia's life. As the eldest sister, Camelia recounted always needing to make sacrifices: she shared clothes and treats with her siblings and gave away her money, earned from working in the village shop, to support her family. When her father worked in Italy, Camelia recalled once receiving a couple of fashionable denim jackets, one for herself and one for her sister. While Camelia looked after her own jacket, her sister tore hers and ended up taking Camelia's a few years down the line. Similar episodes peppered Camelia's account of her childhood. When she was a teenager, Camelia's father 'sent her' to work in Italy as a nanny during the summer. She saved up the money to pay for her commute and finish high school, something her brothers and sisters did not accomplish. She also used part of the money to 'build a room' in the family house. When returning to Romania during her first years in the UK, Camelia and Marcel slept in that room and eventually built their own house in the village. However, Camelia angrily recalled how her brother refused to let her sleep in the room one year when she returned home, claiming that it was his by right since he had bought the firewood to keep the room warm during the winter.

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After reviewing the vignette above, one can more easily situate the influence of gendered norms on Camelia's life and upbringing in Romania. A clear parallel occurs between her mother's work and Camelia's own combination of paid informal work and cooking, cleaning, and childcare in London. Camelia's mother combined the toil of agricultural work with the gendered tasks required to care for her large family. She worked in the fields whenever work became available for a set amount of money per day (*cu ziua*), and used the midday break to complete domestic tasks in her home, like cooking, cleaning, or washing clothes. Within this rural setting, caring for the household also involved looking after animals and crops for the family's subsistence. In a similar fashion, Camelia worked informally

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[27] *Mămăligă* is a polenta dish cooked with water and maize flour, a staple in Romanian diets due to its low cost and satiety.

whenever clients contacted her for haircutting appointments and balanced this work with household chores and caring for her family. She often laboured, like her mother, until late into the night to ensure that everything was in place, before turning to study for her college course. These rhythms of gendered work were also reflected in Camelia's upbringing as she recalled cooking for the family from an early age. Since early adulthood, Camelia also did paid work – whether at the village shop or seasonally in Italy – to support the family and herself. In turn, she combined education with this work and with caring for her younger siblings and cooking.

Not only were these gendered practices continued in Camelia's life in London, but they were materially embedded in the foodstuff her mother sent from Romania. In the episode above, Camelia's explanation and use of grapevine leaves illustrates the gendered norms and good household skills that she sought to embody. Born of the archetypal conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (*noră şi soacră*), Camelia used the grapevine leaves to showcase that frugality, hard work, and favouring common sense over convenience were key values in her image of a good woman in charge of a household. The fact that her mother-in-law picked small leaves and bulked out the expensive packages sent from Romanian with unnecessary additions like maize showcases how important these values were to Camelia's gendered identity. In her own practices, Camelia echoed this frugality and hard work, such as when she received sacks of second-hand clothes from her hairdressing clients. Organising for her mother to send her cabbage and other supplies from Romania also illustrates the frugality and common-sense Camelia valued, since buying such goods from the nearby Romanian shops would incur a much higher bill in the long run, even if negligible and more convenient in the moment.

The kind of food Camelia would cook for her family also illustrated the gendered norms of motherhood that had so far governed much of her life. Cooking Romanian foods like *sarmale* as well as the occasional baked goods like *cozonac* were important tasks for Camelia who valued feeding her family healthy, homecooked meals and passing on Romanian values to her children. If Camelia bought chicken nuggets and frozen pizzas from the aisles of the local discount supermarkets and served these for dinner, Marcel would grumble and they would bicker. Marcel spoke harshly at these times, criticising his wife for feeding the family unhealthy foods and implying that she neglected her duties as a wife and mother. Whenever I would bake a cake or make pancakes for the children, Camelia quickly justified her own failure to do so, adding that she used to bake a lot before having baby Magdalena and offering me the ingredients in place of thanks. However, Camelia hinted at wanting more for her eldest daughter, Anastasia, who she enrolled in various activities such as gymnastics or music lessons. Part of the reason why the episode above is powerful resides in these parallels that help trace gendered labour and norms to specific gender values and roles in Romania. The difficulties of Camelia's mother and the parallels in Camelia's own life are indicative of more than the intergenerational transmission of gender norms. They also embody the manifold transformations in the experiences of women in postsocialist countries.

Women and postsocialism – postsocialist women?

Anthropologists writing about postsocialism at the turn of the millennium argued that gender represented a 'crucial feature of postsocialist transformations' (Gal and Kligman, 2000:14), often overlooked in favour of large-scale processes of marketisation and democratisation. Prior to 1989, socialist gender regimes were fraught with contradiction in their search for 'workers as well as mothers, token leaders as well as quiescent typists' (Gal and Kligman, 2000:6). These contradictions gave rise to severe disjuncture between women's daily practices and the state's top-down discourse, or as Gail Kligman simply put it, 'the gap between what was said and what was experienced' (1998:241). After the Second World War, Romania was a mainly rural society where the patriarchal model of the family with the man as the head of the household was predominant (Stahl, 2000). The Communist regime sought the homogenisation of men and women's experiences, especially in their participation in the labour market and demanded that women also joined the workforce (Voicu and Tufiş, 2012), albeit in feminised industries such as textiles or food processing (Verdery, 1994). The state would step in to provide collective resources to fill the care void left behind. However, the poorly-funded state creches and canteens did little to alleviate the burden of housework on women's lives, who in turn became subject to the 'triple burden' of employment, housework, and children, often relying on their extended families and their leisure time to look after children and the household (Pasca Harsanyi, 1993:64). In short, while the state sought to transform both men and women's participation on the labour market, it did little to develop men's role within the domestic division of labour and deepened the toll of gendered labour on women's lives.

One significant development for understanding Romanian women's lives under socialism was the abortion ban enforced between 1965-1989, one of the most repressive pro-natalist policies in the Soviet bloc (Kligman, 1998). Women's bodies became the creators of the 'new socialist person' (Kligman, 1998:11) and were subjected to extensive surveillance, regular gynaecological examinations and imprisonment if found to have had an abortion, notwithstanding the infertility and numerous deaths resulting from unsafe procedures. Alongside these severe impacts on women's bodies, the repressive pro-natalist policies cemented the image of the woman-as-mother subordinated to the paternalist state – or as Magyari-Vincze phrased it, 'women, as "mothers of the nation", were considered as tools of the party, which was defined as "the father of the nation"' (2006:28). Undoubtedly, many Romanian women found ways to resist these policies and regain control of their fertility, with Kligman (1998) coining the twin concepts of duplicity and complicity to describe how social relations were organised in order to resist state norms. However, the impact of these policies on the hegemonic imaginaries of women as mothers and on society with the 'family unit as its basic cell' (Verdery, 1994:235) continued long after the fall of state socialism.

The role of women as mothers and their association with gendered labour did not disappear with the advent of democracy, marking a slow, yet certain 're-traditionalization' of family life, religion, and a woman's place within the home (Kligman, 1992:400). A good example comes from Adriana

Băban's work on the lifting of the abortion ban in 1989, heralded as the 'gift of democracy' (2000:233). Despite the newfound availability of birth control, the women in Băban's study primarily used abortions to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Both partners and healthcare professionals discouraged the use of other birth control, reproducing gendered attitudes about women being earmarked for marriage and maternity, without control or enjoyment over their bodies. For women from poorer families, abortion became one of the only ways of managing difficult economic circumstances when faced with an unwanted pregnancy. In a very different context, the role played by women in the postsocialist transformation was aptly summarised by Petruța Mîndruț in her ethnography of an aerobics class in a gym in Cluj-Napoca:

> In postsocialist Romania, the body – the female one *per excellentiam* – became a powerful signifying tool, marking the break with the communist past and the onset of a new age […] the symbol of a new, better life, and the marker of the individual's commitment to such a life (2006:22).

Her urban participants relished 'having one hour just for myself' (Mîndruț, 2006:21) where they sought independence by moving their body for enjoyment and health, rather than under the toil of household chores. This led to having a desirable body that aspired towards the Western female body – slim, tanned, sexy – as an epitome of the Western life they sought to embody.

Some of the key differences between the women featured in Mîndruț and Băban's studies showcase another important aspect of postsocialist transformations in women's lives – its cross-cutting effect not only with regard to gender, but also class, sexuality, racialisation, and ethnicity (Magyari-Vincze, 2002). While Băban's participants from poorer backgrounds resorted to abortions to respond to the economic demands imposed by the failing 'transition', Mîndruț's wealthy urban participants instead sought to emulate the Western body and engage in consumption to join the ranks of a new class of women associated with democracy. Class plays a significant role in Romanian women's experiences of the postsocialist transformation. The state predominantly focused on protecting women's rights as workers to encourage employment when faced with declining salaries and precarity, but did little to alleviate the impact on the private domain; for example, paid maternity leave was legally provided only for employed women, a measure which set Romania apart from its neighbouring countries (Fodor *et al.*, 2002). While outside the remit of my work here, the lives of Romanian Roma women merged the impacts of gendered and ethnic inequalities, so that gendered norms were compounded by processes of racialisation (Hașdeu, 2004).

Despite the heterogeneity of experiences for Romanian women, one shared experience was the need to navigate the economic and social conditions of the postsocialist transformation, where migration represented a suitable strategy to improve livelihoods. Authors writing about the mobility of women in Central and Eastern Europe at the time documented how women used their newfound international mobility to remain mobile 'as long as they can' (Morokvasic, 2004:11) through cross-border, circular, or other forms of temporary migration aimed at improving their quality of life at home. Beyond the

material and social arrangements of their mobility, women who moved also needed to tackle new subjectivities and challenge the gendered norms underpinning social and political practices both at 'home' and 'abroad' (Passerini *et al.*, 2007; Alexandru *et al.*, 2013). For Romanian women, these norms involved the complex responsibilities and gendered norms of motherhood and matrimony that remained deeply entrenched in imaginations of womanhood, as briefly outlined above. During their mobility, Romanian women both reproduced and challenged some of these norms, for instance when they fared better abroad than their husbands. For example, research from Ionela Vlase's decade-long fieldwork (2013a, 2013b) with Romanians working in Italy (coming from the same region as Marcel and Camelia) found that Romanian men often felt challenged by their wives who, as domestic workers in upper-middle-class families, could better engage with Italian language and culture and enjoyed their increased economic status in Italy and their independence. When it came to returning to Romania mainly due to their husbands' wishes, the women struggled to find work and used education to consolidate their position, for instance by raising educated girls who they encouraged to pursue careers in male-dominated, prestigious fields like law or medicine (Vlase, 2013b). In the following section, I explore how the Romanian women I met reproduced and challenged the gender norms and expectations of motherhood and matrimony I describe above. In particular, I focus on women's pursuit of education to show how they both reproduced and resisted some of these gendered norms.

'It's about her being a modern woman, independent!'

Around mid-October 2020, the Boian household was set in motion by the arrival of a temporary sub-tenant, Mihai. Coming from the same area of Romania as Camelia and Marcel, Mihai would share a room with Georgel, Camelia's brother, for a couple of weeks until he found a flat for him and his girlfriend who was waiting in Romania at the time. Mihai's impending arrival greatly frustrated Camelia. Marcel forgot to tell her Mihai would arrive until the morning of the event, forcing her to rush to clean the bedroom, clear wardrobe and cupboard space, and tidy up the house. She also grew frustrated with Georgel who did not vacuum his room as she had asked. But most of all, Camelia seemed frustrated with herself. She was planning to do some writing for her college course that day, where she felt she 'was behind' (*rămas în urmă*), a feeling she would often bring up during our conversations about college. She had ordered her wig making kit late so it arrived after the unit of study had finished. In an anxious frenzy, she moved around the kitchen explaining: 'I can't manage to get myself together' (*Nu mai reuşesc să mă adun*). Camelia often described how this feeling affected her relationship with her husband. In her eyes, Marcel failed to support her and often criticised her choice to study: 'He doesn't support me…he holds it over me' (*Nu mă susţine…Îmi scoate ochii*).

The college course was important to Camelia who otherwise summarised her life as 'cleaning, cooking, and cleaning again' (*curăţenie, mâncare, şi iar curăţenie*), a phrase she used frequently. When

she first arrived in London, Camelia started an English-language course with the intention of working as a Teaching Assistant. From a young age, Camelia dreamed of becoming a teacher. When doing her English course, she also picked the only other course with low language requirements – hair and make-up. She took a liking to it and carried on year by year, even completing a short apprenticeship in a hair salon and dreamed of one day teaching hairstyling. Choosing her words carefully, Camelia explained that the college course was a way of proving to herself that she was 'capable' (*capabilă*) and creative: 'After I have created [something], I feel like a new person.' (*După ce am creat, mă simt alt om.'*) Camelia also used her course and the affiliated student finance to teach her eldest daughter, Anastasia, how to be 'strong' (*puternică*). Anastasia suffered from increased cranial pressure and faced a potential life-long disability, so Camelia wanted to expose her daughter to many different experiences and show her how to be independent. This was why she used some of her student finance money to pay for a range of activities for Anastasia, from gymnastics to singing lessons. The college course also allowed Camelia some 'time to myself' (*timp pentru mine*). The previous week, she snuck out to a café with one of her course mates during a break between classes, a luxury she kept hidden from Marcel. Camelia valued the covert coffee break as she struggled to befriend her course mates, most of whom were young girls from London who struggled to relate to Camelia's life as a mother of three-cum-college student.

Despite the rush and frustrations left in the air, Mihai's arrival put the house in a good mood that evening. He was warmly welcomed by Marcel who picked him up from the airport. The men talked shop for hours in the living room, while Camelia served soup (*ciorbă)* and intervened to offer Mihai advice about the couple's new life in London. However, the good mood did not last long. The following morning the house rang loudly with the usual noises of getting the children ready for school, this day combining the added challenge of doing so before Camelia went to college. Camelia eventually managed to stuff all three children in car seats and drove them to three different schools and nurseries before she went to college. Cleaning the table full of spilled milk and cereal, Marcel impatiently exclaimed: 'She doesn't even want to do this job.' He asked me pointedly whose side I was on. I cautiously replied that I didn't think the course was about a job for Camelia. Marcel replied in an exasperated tone: 'No, it's about her being a modern woman, independent! … But *who* had three children?' (*Nu, e ca să fie femeie modernă, independentă! ... Da'* cine *o făcut trei copii?*). At this point, both myself and Mihai burst out laughing, and Mihai jokingly asked Marcel if he played no part in it himself. Yet, the question held no irony to Marcel. For him, the children and the family's day to day life rested on Camelia's shoulders. He reluctantly helped with school drop off and pick up and sometimes drove the children to various activities, from gymnastics to swimming.

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In the episode above, we discover the role played by education in Camelia's life and where it sat within her competing responsibilities as a Romanian woman, wife, and mother. Motivated to improve her

language skills, Camelia enrolled in a hair-styling course after first arriving in London and she developed a passion for it, pursuing more courses year after year. As illustrated in the first half of this chapter, she also found a way to monetise this passion and secure a small income. However, the course amounted to far more than a professional qualification or an informal job, as I reluctantly replied when Marcel prompted me for an opinion above. For Camelia, the course came with 'time for myself' (*timp pentru mine*) and proof that she could complete education (*capabilă*), something she had pursued at great sacrifice ever since her summers of working in Italy to earn money for her commute to high school. The college course also allowed Camelia to escape the drudgery of, in her own words, 'cleaning, cooking and cleaning again' (*curăţenie, mâncare şi iar curăţenie)*. Going to college granted Camelia access to a different part of herself by being creative (*după ce am creat, mă simt alt om)*. It also allowed her to socialise with other young women, for example during rare coffee breaks. As a mother, Camelia used the course to teach her eldest how to be 'strong' (*puternică*) and she earmarked some of her student finance to pay for her daughter's after-school activities.

As the episode above showing Mihai's arrival illustrates, Camelia's pursuit of education cannot be equated with a straightforward or easy process of liberation. She often felt 'behind' and anxiously struggled to balance her studies and her gendered responsibilities within the home – whether to her children, her husband, her siblings (more on this in the next chapter) or to other Romanians like Mihai (as I explore in Chapter 4). Camelia would often complete her coursework late at night, wrote essays whenever she had an hour to spare, handed in assignments after the deadline, and struggled to use the correct technology and language for her course. During our relationship so far, I have often helped spellcheck Camelia's essays and showed her how to use software like Microsoft Word.

Perhaps Marcel's words are best suited to describe what the college course meant for Camelia – 'it's about her being a modern woman, independent!'. While this line was meant to convey Marcel's dissatisfaction, it also provides a good summary of my point here. The pursuit of education made possible by the particular circumstances available to her in London allowed Camelia to sidestep some of the gendered norms in which she found herself. By pursuing this college course, Camelia disrupted the norms of gendered labour that existed in her London home and expand transnationally, while also manipulating gendered expectations to ensure that she could access financial support. For the Romanian women I met, enrolling in college courses provided a valuable source of income first and foremost. During the pandemic, many women actively relied on this money for their families to make ends meet when they or their husbands were left without work. For Mărioara, a single woman in her forties who worked in self-employed cleaning, the money from Student Finance allowed her to be out of work for a few months without incurring massive debt. Cristina, who was godmother to baby Magdalena, also pursued a college course during the pandemic which helped her family pay their costly London rent when her husband was temporarily out of work during the first lockdown. Camelia similarly relied on her student finance to pay for expensive childcare, buy essentials for her course, pay for her children's activities, and save some money for herself.

Outside of their material importance, the use of student finance by women like Camelia provides an insight into how they utilised the specific gendered norms and expectations placed on them to access this financial support. First, I must briefly outline the specific criteria for obtaining student finance in England (as was accurate in 2020), primarily relating to residence and household finances (these are not the only criteria, but the ones relevant for my point here). First, residency is tied into who is deemed eligible for student finance. Those who have 'settled status' (indefinite leave to remain after Brexit) and have been resident in the UK for three years in a row before the first day of the academic year can apply for full support, covering tuition fee loans and maintenance loans. Household income is another criterion, influencing the amount of support one can receive for their studies, including support for childcare. Students who are enrolled in full-time higher education in the UK and have children under 15 can receive additional help with childcare costs under the Childcare Grant or additional funding under a Parents' Learning Allowance, depending on household income. In the UK in 2020, free childcare was otherwise limited to 15 hours for children aged 3 and 4, or 30 hours of free childcare for parents who were working, fell below a maximum household income, and had the correct immigration status.

For women like Camelia who were predominantly caring for young children and the home, had little to no documented income, and had been in the UK for over five years, student financial support provided an additional income and an opportunity to afford otherwise expensive childcare. In Camelia's situation, the childcare grant helped provide costly childcare for her youngest, baby Magdalena, who was only six months when she started going to nursery. What makes Camelia eligible for this state support is interesting because it shows how women on the move can use their gendered circumstances and the attached expectations to access financial support and pursue higher education. In the state's imagination, Camelia fit the bill of a young mother in need of support to pursue higher education. She met the eligibility criteria as she has been in the UK for over five years and held 'settled status'. Therefore, she fit the 'sedentarist' imagination (Malkki, 1995:16) of the state whereby her mobility was no longer deemed dangerous or conspicuous (despite the fact that she remained highly mobile between Romania and the UK). Her precarious economic status also helped her fit the eligibility criteria. Having no documented income, Camelia's eligibility for support relied solely on Marcel's earnings. This was a two-sided sword – while Camelia could access support because of her lack of documented income, it also left her dependent on Marcel's willingness to provide financial information (which she painstakingly had to ask for over and over again when enrolling at college). Camelia therefore fit the vulnerability confines of the poor migrant (yet settled) young mother in need of education to better herself. Most importantly, she also fit the neoliberal expectation of seeking self-improvement through education.

If we are to utilise Bridget Anderson's archetypes of citizenship (2013), Camelia's situation would place her within the category of the 'Tolerated Citizen'. Anderson's (2013) theorisation includes the Good and Failed Citizen, with their sub-roles of the Tolerated and Non-citizen respectively. In

Anderson's theorisation, the marks of a Good Citizen are derived from their being 'firmly anchored in liberal ideas about the individual, autonomy, freedom, belonging, and property' (2013:3). At the same time, the Good Citizen demonstrates a strong moral compass that enables her to consider those around her. In contrast, being an outsider – whether a Non-citizen, a Failed Citizen, or a Tolerated Citizen – is partly derived from not sharing in these 'right' values (Anderson, 2013:4). The Failed Citizen is theorised as an individual or group failing to live up to liberal values and therefore posing a threat to the community of value, despite being part of this community at its origins. Rather than simply threatening the cohesion, social welfare, or employment of liberal societies (as these are often the tropes ascribed to this archetype), the Failed Citizen threatens the very principles of equality, rights, or freedom. The Failed Citizen is not modern because they do not fit the model of the 'flexible neoliberal subject, with a portfolio career, making the most of every opportunity, improving skills, and selling his labour to the highest bidder' (2013:7). Instead, one learns to question the rationality and judgement of the Failed Citizen, merging them into an unmodern and dangerous subject. In opposition, the Tolerated Citizen, whether a 'hardworking, legal, and a taxpayer' migrant or a deserving claimant (Anderson, 2013:6), is marked by a pursuit of these 'right' values and the policing of others' adherence to these values.

Camelia was precariously perched on the margins of Tolerated Citizenship when she used her gendered circumstances to pursue education and therefore be deemed deserving of financial support. She embodied the neoliberal ideas of self-improvement through formal education. Her pursuit of education and financial support also fit the confines of equality as the British state seeks to support those deemed worse off or vulnerable to pursue education and improve their lives. Gender irrevocably played an important role in Camelia's claims to deservingness, with a particular focus on motherhood. As Anderson attests, the 'right kind of motherhood' (2013:7) is a key criterion for belonging to the community of value. In her pursuit of education, Camelia embodied a deserving kind of motherhood – she sought betterment and education not only for herself, but also for the sake of her children, and was sufficiently poor and immobile to warrant support, yet still prove worthy to complete the course. Naturally, Camelia only fit the confines of the Tolerated Citizen temporarily and precariously. Was she to have more (to be read as too many) children, lose her 'settled status', or apply for benefits, her situation would change. As Anderson explained, these categories are porous and membership can change when different groups and individuals slip in out of the community of value – 'sometimes accepted, sometimes marginal, sometimes examples of Britain's fine institutions, generosity, and tolerance and other times a threat to British identity and themselves intolerant' (2013:7). However, these categories remain helpful to understand what norms of belonging and citizenship play out in the lives of individuals, in this case women, on the move. So far, I used the example of financial support for education to illustrate how women like Camelia could manipulate the gendered norms operating both within their everyday life and at a broader level (in the eyes of the state) to pursue education and secure financial support. However, this process did not occur individually, but it worked collectively and relied

on the social ties and support of other Romanian women, to which I finally turn, as they have been an ever-present theme in this chapter.

Hiring moşulica

Caring for children and the home did not exist as an individual pursuit for the Romanian women I met. Instead, it relied on a web of connections with other Romanian women, whether kin or not. In Camelia's life, this was clearest when she informally hired her youngest's *moşulica* to care for the baby rather than sending baby Magdalena to nursery. *Moşulica* represents an unusual role in the Romanian kinship nexus, stuck at the blurry intersection between what classic anthropologists would call 'blood' and 'fictive' kinship. Different from the godmother (*naşa), moşulica* would traditionally be another woman in the village, often the midwife, who would assist not only with the birth, but with the everyday tasks of caring for a newborn and act as another source of support for new mothers. Only present in certain areas of Romania, the *moşulica* played a key role in the Boian extended family. Camelia strategically selected a suite of godparents for her family, combining different ages and experiences in Romania and in the UK. The godparents at Marcel and Camelia's wedding and their eldest daughter's christening were much older than the couple and more established in the UK. The godparents of her next two children, however, were younger couples who had children of a similar age and arrived in the UK around the same time as the Boians. *Moşulica* was slightly older than these godparents and more experienced in Romania but less exposed to life in the UK, remaining a prized guest at celebrations and the source of reliable advice.

Shortly after I arrived in the Boian house, Camelia was faced with a difficult decision as to how she could attend her college course and also care for baby Magdalena, who was five months old at the start of the academic year. While her role as a student involved some state-subsidised childcare, Camelia did not want to spend most of her student loan on topping up nursery hours, especially since Marcel was unlikely to provide any money towards this. She considered various options, including bringing a young female relative to London to act as a live-in nanny. This option, however, would involve significant cost as the family would need to pay a small salary as well as room and board, whereas sub-letting a room served as a constant and important revenue stream for them.

With all this in mind, Camelia decided to call on her *moşulica*, a plump, straight-talking woman in her forties whom Camelia and her extended family referred to as 'Tanti Mărioara'.[28] The *moşulica*'s obligation to support new mothers partly inspired Camelia's decision. Tanti Mărioara lived about an hour away with her husband and three adult sons who all worked in London's booming construction industry. She often joined the Boians for name days, birthdays, and celebrations, especially when those

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[28] 'Tanti' is a respectful term which could be loosely translated as 'Auntie', less deferential than the formal term 'Doamna', corresponding to the English 'Mrs'.

involved baby Magdalena, for whom she brought gifts of clothes and toys. Her husband, a surly, grey-haired man, sometimes joined Tanti Mărioara at these parties and seemed genuinely moved by interactions with the baby, but little else impressed him. Tanti Mărioara was not in formal employment at the time, but spent most of her time cooking and cleaning for her family, as well as taking up any ad-hoc work in cleaning. I was unsure if Tanti Mărioara wanted a paid job, as she generally relied on the wages of her husband and sons.

This was partly the reason why Camelia considered hiring Tanti Mărioara a suitable arrangement for all parties involved. It would offer the woman some disposable income, 'money *for her'* (*bani* pentru ea) as Camelia powerfully put it. The two women agreed that Tanti Mărioara would come to the Boian household two days per week and care for the baby while Camelia was at college. This arrangement soon morphed out of these initial boundaries. Since Camelia required time to study and complete her assignments, she asked Tanti Mărioara to come and watch the baby for one additional day every week. Camelia soon became disappointed when Tanti Mărioara did not attend to the other household tasks that she often combined with childcare. While the woman would pick up stray toys and sweep the living room floor, she never ventured out of her way to cook for the family, scrub the sticky counter tops or clean the windows covered in small handprints. This outraged Camelia since, in her eyes, the woman could easily attend to such tasks, especially when the baby was sleeping. At Camelia's request, Tanti Mărioara begrudgingly ventured out to pick up Sebi, Camelia's son, from the nearby nursery, and looked after him for a few hours. Camelia saw these extra assignments as easily offset by the occasional gifts she bought for Tanti Mărioara, such as discounted bedlinens from the nearby supermarket or other household items, and by inviting her to accompany them on daytrips to local parks. These gifts however did little to ease the toll the work was taking on Tanti Mărioara. Given the long commute, the woman would often return to her own house in the late evening, where a mountain of cleaning, cooking, and other household chores awaited her, as well as the disapproval of her husband and sons who saw little value in this new job-cum-favour. When Tanti Mărioara voiced her concern, Camelia brushed it off and argued that the woman could surely attend to these chores on the days when she was not looking after baby Magdalena. Suffice to say, the arrangement between the two women did not last longer than a month and it impacted their relationship for the year I spent in the Boian household. While Tanti Mărioara was still invited to religious holidays, birthdays, and name days, she was seldom offered the same attention as the other guests. In turn, Tanti Mărioara would spend most of her time playing with the children and refrained from offering to help tidy up or clear the table, as the other women invited to these celebrations often did.

<div align="center">***</div>

The episode above illustrates the collective nature of the gendered processes I explored in this chapter, showing how other Romanian women were enlisted to sustain the different engagements present in my participants' lives. Tanti Mărioara was not alone in this, of course. For Amalia, whose story I explore in Chapter 4, her mother-in-law moved from Romania to work in London and save some

more money for retirement, but also to help care for her grandchildren, cook for the family, and serve as a confidant for Amalia's teenage sons. In the example above, the appointment of the *moşulica* and the imagined live-in nanny who may come from Romania showcase how Romanian women were deeply embedded in social and kin connections, and how their gendered labour was sustained and remade through their ties to other Romanian women. Throughout this chapter (and indeed this thesis), Camelia's practices and reckonings as a woman and mother constantly referenced members of her family: her mother, her mother-in-law, her husband, and her children. They also included those outside of her kin nexus, such as her haircutting clients or her course mates at college. *Moşulica*'s appointment continued this trend to show how other women's work and support bolstered Camelia's ability to pursue education and balance her other commitments, as she in turn helped others balance these responsibilities. For example, Camelia would often babysit the two children of one of her neighbours, a Polish single mother, when the woman went grocery shopping or completed other chores. Camelia would similarly look after her godparents' children when their mother needed to go to college or when the children's activities overlapped. Even though my examples in this chapter in part illustrate the burden of gendered norms on Romanian women's lives (both in their postsocialist and migrant conditions), the collective nature of this work also showcases the interdependence required to both reproduce and at times undo some of these gendered norms. Rather than acting as individuals, Romanian women balanced multiple commitments with the support and labour of the other women around them. At times, this helped undo some of the gendered norms at play. In Camelia's example above, enlisting *moşulica* meant that Camelia could redistribute some the money received from the state to provide an additional income to another Romanian woman, 'money for her' as she put it, rather than to top up expensive childcare.

However, the episode above also shows how social ties between Romanian women could reproduce power imbalances and unsettle the norms present in Romanian kinship and friendship structures. Camelia and Marcel's status as young, but fairly settled migrants disrupted the norms of seniority present in the Romanian extended kinship nexus. While *moşulica* traditionally plays an important role in helping new mothers, her status as an older, more experienced woman would in turn earn her respect and deference. *Mosulica* may help bathe the new born, change diapers or provide childcare, but this would often be done on her terms and retain a ritual, rather than everyday, quality. In Camelia's case, the exchange of a small monthly wage undid these norms of seniority and the ritual aspect of the role, turning her into an exigent employer rather than a deferential young mother in need of assistance. Paying her *moşulica* served to formalise the arrangement between the two women, taking some aspects of formal employment, such as working an agreed number of days per week in exchange for a monthly wage. Yet, the obligations behind the relationship muddied these waters. Camelia felt compelled to also supplement the appointment with gifts and invitations to daytrips, and also asked for additional help with tasks such as nursery pick-up. In turn, Tanti Mărioara restricted her labour to easy tasks such as sweeping or tidying, and did not venture into more strenuous chores, despite Camelia's disapproval.

Beyond unsettling these kinship norms, the appointment of Tanti Mărioara also shows important tensions inherent to migration for the Romanian women I met. Tanti Mărioara was uncomfortably caught between the gendered expectations of her family and the need to secure an additional income. The possibility to secure 'money *for her*' was an important element in the arrangement between the two women. In Camelia's eyes, the meagre wage she provided stretched further than the small sum of money it amounted to, also encompassing a small chunk of freedom and independence for a woman otherwise caught in the drudgery of *curățenie, mâncare și iar curățenie* ('cleaning, cooking, and cleaning again') that she sought to escape through her college course. In this situation, the migratory experience allowed Camelia to provide this opportunity to another woman, undoing some of the gendered expectations placed on her.

Conclusion

Rather than focusing on paid employment alone as I anticipated before my fieldwork, this chapter explored the competing types of work present in the lives of Romanian women in London, including informal work, cooking, cleaning, childcare, and education. By following the daily rhythms of Camelia's life, this chapter illustrated the complex negotiations involved in women's efforts to balance these competing responsibilities. Unpacking these responsibilities also provided an insight into how the women both transgressed and reproduced gender norms within the material and relational networks that were available and possible in London. For example, in their pursuit of further education, women like Camelia utilised their status of settled young female migrants to secure an additional income and to improve their lives and the lives of their children. Rather than a straightforward equation between education and liberation, balancing education with other responsibilities came at a cost for women like Camelia. They in turn enlisted the help of other Romanian women to meet these challenges, whether kin or not. The resulting deals struck between women, like the employment of *moșulica*, at times unsettled established hierarchies and norms along the lines of gender, seniority, or kinship.

I purposefully started from the practices of Romanian women in my ethnographic material because their agency, practices and hard work underscored many of the other processes I explore in this thesis. Despite their importance, as I have explained earlier in this chapter , the competing roles assumed by Romanian women during their mobility remain underexplored in the literature. Their practices were also routinely missed from my interlocutors' accounts, especially those of Romanian men, where helping hands appeared to be routinely masculine. My interlocutors often recounted being helped by other Romanians but some of the work this involved, for example the tasks in which Camelia engaged to prepare for Mihai's arrival earlier in this chapter, missed from their tales. In part, I argue this may be because of the powerful gendered norms of modesty, motherhood, and matrimony that women like Camelia learned, emulated and at times fought against from an early age. In their discussions of the everyday practices of *curățenie, mâncare, și iar curățenie* ('cleaning, cooking, and cleaning again'),

kinship or marriage, the Romanian women I met provided me with an insight into more than gendered norms and responsibilities. They also remained painfully aware of the interdependence required to make ends meet in London. It is no coincidence that the vignettes in this chapter enlist the words and practices of many Romanian women around Camelia. By paying attention to how Camelia combined her gendered roles with work, I aimed to also showcase the many other Romanians (primarily other Romanian women) on whom she relied to go about her daily life. It is this interdependence that I explore in the next three chapters of this thesis, as it was both pivotal and highly contested for my participants' lives in London who relied on, yet also heavily distrusted other Romanians. In the next chapter, I continue exploring this interdependence by unpacking the importance of kinship roles, once again focusing on Camelia's experiences, specifically on the process of hosting and helping her siblings in London.

Chapter 3: Being a good host to one's family: Debating kinship, duty and obligation

After their visit to Romania in the summer of 2020, the Boians brought Camelia's younger brother, Georgel, to live in their spare room and earn some money working in London's booming construction industry. A quiet 18-year-old with a slim figure and a tanned face, Georgel had briefly been to London the previous year. Camelia explained that the young man saved a lot of money during his time in the UK, but he also got mixed up with some 'shady gypsies'. After talking with a woman over the Internet, the young man ended up moving out of his sister's house and into the house of these supposed malevolent Roma people who 'ate up his savings'. At this point in the story, Camelia and Marcel recounted how they helped the young man escape this arrangement, and how they 'sent him home' after the affair was resolved. During their visit to Romania, Camelia decided to give Georgel another chance. He had struggled to find work at home, depleting the already strained family finances. Facilitating migration of family members, especially younger siblings, was often expected of Romanians when they returned home.

However, this practice was not as seamless as it appears, nor did it unfold effortlessly within the 'transnational social field' (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004) where migrants' social ties operate. Instead, it was permeated by a wealth of asymmetries, involving both so-called 'migrants' and 'non-migrants' (Carling, 2008). This became apparent when Georgel decided to leave London one Sunday morning in November 2020, two months after I had moved into the Boian household. After a few weeks of unsuccessful job searching, the young man walked into the kitchen and proclaimed there were 'no jobs in London'. He explained that he would be better off returning to Romania to help his parents with subsistence agriculture and his favourite pastime of rearing goats. Scurrying, he started to gather his foodstuff from the greasy Formica cupboard. 'When do you leave?' I asked. 'There's a car leaving tonight' explained the lad.

Life in London had not been as prosperous as Georgel, and many like him, imagined. He was living in Camelia's spare bedroom and had little privacy. Working as a labourer in construction in the cold English autumn meant many hours in the rain and wind. At home, he had little respite and did not set foot outside the house even on his days off, except to visit his brother and other sister who also lived in London. He needed to pay rent to Camelia for this room, and the weeks of not working meant accruing debt to his sister. On top of this, Camelia often scolded the young man about his inability to find a job and his unwillingness to pitch in around the house. She frequently scheduled various chores for them to do together – cleaning out the garage, hosing down the dirty garden deck, or moving furniture around the cramped house – and asked for his unwilling help with childcare. Seeing that the

young man struggled to find work on his own, Camelia and Marcel paid for a CSCS card[29] for him. They eventually found him small jobs on construction projects in private homes through their local network of friends and acquaintances, but even these small jobs dried up after a while.

Naturally, Georgel did not explain any of these issues to me, nor did he mention them to his sister. On the morning when he decided to leave London, he simply walked to Camelia's bedroom and confronted her holding a box of cheap washing powder. I imagine he walked in and asked her if she wanted to keep the remainder of the box. What ensued next must have been a moment of silence and a look of utter confusion on Camelia's face. Asked why he wanted to give the box away, Georgel would explain that he no longer needed the washing powder, because he decided he would return to Romania that night. I write that I imagine these things because, as things stood, I was not an eyewitness to the scene. I remained in the crowded kitchen where Georgel collected the box of detergent and told me he had yet to share his decision with his sister. Despite not being witness to the siblings' conversation, I did not need to imagine its aftermath. I heard it as clearly as if I was sitting in the next room. In a tone of shock and incomprehension, Camelia started shouting insults at her brother for his ingratitude and lack of perseverance. Soon thereafter, Marcel's voice joined in. By then, the shouting was accompanied by loud banging noises. The children ran downstairs and were delighted to find me in the kitchen where I distracted them with Disney songs and the promise of a sweet breakfast. The upbeat songs covered up the loud shouting and bangs. After what could have been an hour or just five minutes, Camelia came downstairs to get the children ready for church. She squeezed my arm in thanks and avoided my eyes. Later that night, Marcel offered me a glass of wine and casually laughed off the morning's events. He joked that he 'picked him [Georgel] up by the scruff of the neck a bit' (*l-am luat de gât puțin*) upon finding out his intention to leave London. Suffice to say, Georgel did not travel back to Romania that evening as he had planned. He left London a month later for the Christmas holidays, after which he did not return. His name was hardly ever mentioned in the Boian household thereafter.

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Georgel's story was not isolated within the kinship universe of Romanians in London, but it was one of the most powerful scenes of 'doing kinship' I witnessed. Most Romanian families, like families in many other contexts, hide such events from view. Shouting insults, sibling feuds, and even physical altercations are casually swept under the carpet and seen as marks of 'uncivilised' or 'untamed' families.

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[29]A Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) card is used in the construction sector to prove that workers have appropriate trainings for the jobs they do on site. The card reflects different occupations and qualifications (Labourer, Apprentice, etc.). Workers need to pass a Health, Safety and Environment test to show they will be safe on the site. Despite the fact that the joint cost of the CSCS card and exam was £58 during my fieldwork, numerous intermediaries offered the same service for as much as £300 to ensure one will pass the exam by various fraudulent means. Tales of these exams and the astronomical fees paid to so-called 'agencies' or 'accountants' peppered my exchanges in the field and were treated as a normal service required to start out in construction, especially when one spoke little English and had limited digital literacy, both of which applied in Georgel's case.

These outbursts counter the ideal of family reinforced in North American and Western European countries – a family that only meets a few times a year or for milestone celebrations. For such families, caring in times of need might take the form of sending care packages or a card in the post. This chapter investigates what happens when caring for family means taking them in, often at great expense, and helping them get settled in a different country. By exploring the norms of duty and obligation involved in facilitating the mobility of family members, I demonstrate the complex dynamics of kinship for the Romanians I met.

In this chapter, I follow Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak (2020) and connect insights from the anthropology of kinship with mobility and migration studies. They argue for a need to evade ethnocentric definitions of kinship in order to allow for the plasticity of kinship practices for people on the move. Rather than focusing on pre-defined notions of kinship, I pay attention to the claims and counter-claims of kinship made by the Romanians I met. Put simply, I do not restrict the concept of kinship within the bounds of nation-state borders or those of the nuclear family, but instead define kinship ethnographically by paying attention to who gets involved in my participants' claims of duty and obligation. Claims of duty and obligation are situated within the claims of consanguinity and mutuality constituent to kinship. At times, these claims involved blood relatives like siblings, but they also pulled in godparents (*nași)* and godparents-in-waiting (*moși)*, as well as housemates in shared houses (like myself). By focusing on this 'kinship-as-doing', I hope to show how kinship 'provides a dynamic reservoir of resources with which to creatively imagine and put into practice visions that enable moving to and living in new worlds' (Carsten, 2020:321).

Alongside these generative possibilities, I also dwell on the 'dark side of kinship' (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak, 2020:309) in order to refute simplistic associations between kinship and solidarity, reciprocity, or trust. This is why I chose the concepts of duty and obligation in this chapter, rather than simply focusing on relationality or mutuality. Duty and obligation better capture the ethnographic nuances of fulfilling one's role of caring for family, while also at times feeling constrained and frustrated by the expectations to do so. I focus on these complex manifestations of kinship for the Romanians I met, dwelling on the mismatch between their practices and their expectations which often sit at the heart of the darker side of kinship. I once again mainly draw on Camelia's life and my observations within the Boian household to illustrate the demands of kinship within my participants' lives abroad.

Here, I centre Camelia's attempts to help her siblings come to London and earn some money. I focus on this specific practice of facilitating migration for family members not as a mere case study, but to illustrate broader claims and counter-claims involved in reproducing kinship norms. Most of the relationships I unpack in this chapter are between siblings, in particular Camelia's relationship with her younger sisters and brothers. Each of these relationships were, in their own ways, further complicated by the siblings' differences in age, gender, marital status, and socioeconomic status, to name a few cross-cutting factors. However, Camelia's relationships with her siblings were also shaped by particular

kinship ideals – a set of culturally and context-specific moral expectations about how siblings *should* behave towards each other. In short, it was Camelia's duty as an older, more 'settled' sister (due to her time in London, her education, her marital status) to help her siblings 'make something of themselves', to borrow her own turn of phrase from our very first conversation in 2019.[30] In turn, it was her siblings' duty to return the favour by showing loyalty to the family and by helping Camelia in her times of need – whether in mundane ways in everyday life, or in the future. These duties and ideals became irrevocably intertwined with the siblings' relationships, past experiences, and future hopes. In this chapter, I untangle these expectations to showcase the sense of duty that holds Romanian families together when they are stretched across nation-state borders, especially when they seem to have been stretched too thinly.

From 'invitations' to 'pioneer migrants': the role of kinship in recent Romanian migration

Facilitating migration was a common occurrence and topic of discussion for many Romanians in London, rooted in the significance of the practice for recent Romanian migration (see Sandu, 2010). Before and after Romania joined the Schengen area in 2002, social networks of acquaintances and kin played an important role in finding a place for newcomers in the so-called 'black markets' of Italy (Bleahu, 2007; Anghel, 2013) and Spain (Bleahu, 2004; Elrick and Ciobanu, 2009). In Spain, 'pioneer migrants' (Bleahu, 2004:24) would assist their relatives not only with border crossing (whether directly or indirectly with a *călăuză* – smuggler), but they also offered a place to sleep and helped them navigate work on the black market. Similarly, relatives in Western Europe provided migrants with 'invitations' (Anghel, 2013:117) to obtain short-term visas that would allow them safe passage into the Schengen area and then to their country of choice. Once Romanians established communities in countries of destination, migration developed from an individual pursuit to a larger, kinship-based affair. Anghel traces the mobility of money and people from the Romanian city of Borșa to Milan in the early 2000s:

> The mechanism of migration was the following: Sandu sent money back home to one of his relatives, Vali, in order to help him migrate. With this money, Vali bought a Schengen visa in Borșa and went to Italy. Sandu has already looked for a job for Vali and put him up when he arrived. After getting a job, Vali started to contribute to the household's expenditures. Finally, Vali paid back his loan and remained in Sandu's flat. The money of his loan was sent back to Borșa to finance the migration of others. Afterwards, migrants moved to other houses in Milan. A system of common housing emerged. This

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[30] I first met Camelia during my Master's research, which was a pilot for my doctoral thesis (see Methods section in the Introduction). During our conversation in a café close to the home where I would eventually live a year later, Camelia spoke emphatically about her wish to help her siblings 'make something of themselves' and the difficulties she encountered in this process, which haunted her experiences in London.

mechanism was part of a kin-based migration strategy that facilitated migration. It illustrates how migration developed from Borșa and how kinship networks functioned (Anghel, 2013:119-120).

This ethnographic snapshot showcases the importance of kinship ties in the early days of intra-European Romanian migration. The cyclical process described above highlights how family ties came to be re-made through the exchange of money, favours, knowledge, and hospitality abroad. The success of this cyclical process rested on the continued articulation of these family ties. Once the newcomer got settled and repaid his debts, the cycle could start again and in time even develop its own informal infrastructures. An example above is what Anghel called 'a system of common housing' where Romanians moved from house to house in Milan hosted by other Romanians, whether kin or not.

In a similar vein, helping a family member migrate took on these practical and material pressures for the Romanians I met. Romanians were expected to help family members during their first months in the UK (*acomodare*) by offering them room and board and even extra cash to cover expenses like transport. Their services were also often required to navigate bureaucratic endeavours like National Insurance Number applications, or to find jobs by mobilising their personal connections (as I explore in the following chapter). The extent of this help varied for each person I met. For some, their family did not help them find work. Others might not have been supported to migrate with information or money, but their family put them up when they arrived. And for some, their relatives provided little to no assistance, or they did not have family in London, leaving them to rely only on friends, acquaintances or other Romanians they met after their arrival in the capital.

While helpful to understand the material practices of helping family members migrate, the snapshot above misses out on the relational aspect of caring for and helping family abroad. Rather than acting as mere migration intermediaries, facilitating migration for family came with many more obligations than simply paying for travel or finding a job. When it happened, the exchange of money was multiplied by an exchange of duty and obligation (which continues to operate even when people bring over non-family members as I explore in Chapter 4, also see Vicol, 2019). Georgel's story, unpacked in the beginning of this chapter, highlights these claims and counter-claims of duty and obligation. Rather than fixed notions and practices, they are settled in dialogue with family members, remain fluid, and change over time.

As client is to patron? Debating the duty and obligation to help family abroad

At first, the duty folded into Georgel and Camelia's relationship can be likened to a patronage relationship. Although eliciting substantive debates between anthropologists working in the Mediterranean[31] for the past five decades, classical studies of patronage agree on the format of the

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[31] The Mediterranean represents as a contested concept in anthropology. Its uncritical use as a regional ethnographic category during the 1960s-1980s led to the concept being used as a trope for a homogenous region

relationship at hand (Campbell, 1964; Silverman, 1965; Pitt-Rivers, 1971). Patronage is defined as a dyadic relationship between two poles of unequal power or status, the patron and the client. Power is imagined to flow vertically between these two actors who otherwise originate from different social strata. While the patron offers protection and access to otherwise scarce resources, the client repays them with loyalty and favours to be called upon at a later date. As Wolf explained: 'Clients are duty-bound not merely to offer expressions of loyalty but also to demonstrate that loyalty' (2004:17 [1966]). This duty on the part of the client is essential because it creates an asymmetrical reciprocity which underpins the patronage relationship. The resulting exploitative, yet deeply personal relationship between patron and client is at the heart of anthropologists' fascination with the concept (Gellner and Waterbury, 1977; Shore, 2006).

For my participants, duty amounted to a similar paradoxical relationship of asymmetrical reciprocity, illustrated here by the practice of helping family members migrate. In particular, duty becomes helpful to unpack Georgel's attempted flight from the Boian household recounted at the beginning of this chapter. Within Georgel and Camelia's relationship, care was set in motion by a sense of duty. It was Camelia's duty as the older sister to help her younger siblings find their ways in life, a claim that became apparent the more we spoke about her family. From an early age, Camelia had helped her mother care for her youngest siblings. When her own six-year-old daughter was unwilling to help with household chores, Camelia boasted of her making *mămăligă* on an open fire at a similar age. Later, in her teenage years, Camelia continued to care for her siblings when working as a babysitter in Italy during her school holidays. She painstakingly saved money to buy her sisters clothes out of the meagre earnings that were supposed to pay for her commute to high school for the entire school year. During her six years in London, this pattern of caring for family continued when Camelia facilitated the mobility of all her siblings to the UK. Besides Georgel, she welcomed her other brother and two sisters into her house and supported them to find work and obtain the necessary paperwork. She also brought over her teenage siblings to visit London during their school holidays. However, caring for her siblings and hosting them was not a frictionless process. Reminding of the patron-client relationship outlined above, the patron gains power through their service, while the client accumulates a sense of debt and obligation.

For Georgel, this firstly meant accruing financial debt in the form of rent arrears and loans to cover his job searching efforts, like the CSCS card. This financial debt was doubled by a moral debt – *obligație* (obligation). In the Romanian kinship universe, *obligații* permeate social life. Entire wedding marquis are filled by the *obligații* of attendees to repay the debt incurred after someone connected to the wedding party attended one of their family's milestone celebrations. In Georgel and Camelia's story,

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frozen in time and irrevocably connected with 'moral-value terms' (Herzfeld, 1980:348) such as honour, shame or clientelism.

obligații occurred on two different levels, taking on both a practical and a symbolic value. In the mundane, it meant that Georgel should pitch in around the house and occupy himself with chores. The drudgery of hosing down the garden deck or helping Camelia sort out the garage was never expected of me. However, Camelia routinely tricked Georgel into helping with such tasks and later commented on the poor job the lad had done or on his general unwillingness to help. Georgel's *obligație* also elicited chores that would have otherwise not been destined for him, specifically childcare. Despite the gendered nature of childcare in the Boian household (see Chapter 2), Georgel was often expected to look after the children. He unwillingly looked after his nephew or baby niece for hours when Camelia went grocery shopping or ferried the eldest to activities like gymnastics lessons. As a member of the family, he was also expected to care for and think about the children in general. Whenever the lad wandered to the nearby Romanian shop and returned without any sweets for the children, Camelia noticed and ensured to comment on it later: 'He didn't even get a chocolate to the children.' Here, Georgel violated his *obligație* in two significant ways – by not doing the chores expected of him and not showing a sense of duty towards the family in general (the very sense of duty that pushed Camelia to bring him to London in the first place).

Beyond these mundane duties that may be expected of a family member living in one's house (even in Romania), mobility adds another symbolic layer of obligation, captured in Georgel's failed attempt to return to Romania. In his attempted flight, Georgel rejected the second chance that Camelia and Marcel granted him when they brought him to London a second time. Migrants can act as gatekeepers not only to processes and practices (from finding a job to putting someone up and helping with their papers), but also as judges of belonging. Camelia and Marcel vouched for Georgel, marked him as a potentially successful migrant, and supported him to 'make something of himself', to borrow Camelia's turn of phrase. In deciding that he would be better off returning to his goats in Romania – a decision at which he arrived alone – Georgel invalidated the symbolic obligation he incurred by coming to London. To honour his obligation towards Camelia and Marcel, he needed to stick it out, work hard, and make money. This is not to say that Camelia ever imagined Georgel as an immigrant, as someone who would settle down in London, climb up the ranks, and eventually take his children to the London Eye or similar tourist attractions. That was never the vision that Camelia had of her brother, as it was not the vision she held of herself. Yet, Georgel was obliged to at least entertain the possibility of life abroad for a few months in order to save some money with which he could return to Romania.

The rejection of these two-sided obligations, both mundane and symbolic, acted as catalysts for the violence that ensued in the Boian household on that cold November morning. In Camelia and Marcel's eyes, the debt was not settled, even if it is unlikely that such debts can ever be truly settled. Returning to Wolf's predicament quoted above (2004:17 [1966]), Georgel failed on both counts in his role as a 'client' – both in expressing his loyalty through mundane chores (from cleaning to childcare) and in demonstrating that loyalty through the symbolic *obligație* of sticking through with life in London. By violating this unwritten layer of their relationship, Georgel led to the fracturing of the social

relationship between himself and his sister. However, stopping here in unpacking Georgel's attempted flight and his wider role in the Boian household leaves out some important dynamics about how kinship is made and unmade abroad. To place Camelia steadily in the role of the patron and Georgel in the role of the client would miss out on a key dimension in the episode above, as would the single focus on duty within the patron-client dyad. It would risk transforming this account into a utilitarian depiction of their practices, as actors that maximise their resources and keep mathematical logs of the duty owed. What is fundamentally uncomfortable about this image, and about *obligații* and the tenuous connections between patronage and kinship more broadly, boils down to the role of self-interest.

'She made money off my back': The contested role of self-interest in kinship abroad

The way to proceed is perhaps to address the uneasiness of the reader for the past couple of paragraphs. Applying a patronage-like filter to family relationships may have made the reader uneasy as family and friendship are often removed from such accounts, despite patronage borrowing the language of kinship and even incorporating some kin ties (Gellner and Waterbury, 1977). In classic anthropological accounts of patronage, kinship and friendship are removed from patronage, which is reserved for political or public interactions. While patronage relationships are theorised as highly systematic and structural (manifested as middlemen or brokers), family relationships are imagined as more horizontal in their attempts to assist one another. Drawing on his ethnography of Andalusia, Pitt-Rivers defined patronage as 'lopsided friendship' whereby the perceived equality and free exchange of favours within friendship turns to patronage in a context of material scarcity and inequality – one that is 'reciprocal but unequal' (1971:154). Wolf built on this idea and emphasised how the power imbalance at hand turns friendship into a patronage relationship:

> When instrumental friendship reaches *a maximum point of imbalance*, so that one partner is clearly superior to the other in his or her capacity to grant goods and services, we approach the critical point at which friendship gives way to the patron-client tie. (2004:16 [1966], my emphasis).

Within these classic theorisations, friendship and kinship are removed from patronage, which is decidedly enveloped in self-interest. This interest-free conceptualisation of family undoubtedly continues in present-day representations of kinship in Western European and Anglo-Saxon contexts. It is sufficient to think of the Hallmark-card representation of the nuclear family or the families of American sitcoms. Applying the notions of duty or obligation to such contexts feels uncomfortable and can only be done with an end message of a (gendered and therefore worthwhile) sacrifice for the family's wellbeing, such as a mother's duty to care for children. Undoubtedly, the notion of interest within the family context also reminds us of the 'untamed' family dynamics that counteract contemporary imaginations of kinship. Placing the interest of the family before that of the community has been undermined as 'amoral familism' (Banfield, 1967) and linked to a lack of modernity and

progress. While such arguments have made the subject of significant academic critique, they continue to exist in contemporary imaginations of the family.

Placing the interest of the family before the individual also counteracts the neoliberal rhetoric according to which one is the sole master of their destiny and of their demise (Harvey, 2005, 2007). The limited ethnographic accounts of kinship in Romania counteract this neoliberal predicament (Chelcea, 2003, 2021). While a substantive amount of anthropological literature focused on the political and economic frameworks of 'post-transition' life outside of kinship, ethnographic findings highlighted how families ensured subsistence and social reproduction both during and after the collapse of state socialism. For example, when describing how Romanians dealt with the 'culture of shortage' of the 1980s, Chelcea (2002) outlined the importance of kinship and friendship ties for small-scale border trade. For household-oriented border trade tourism, women called on their relatives, as well as their neighbours and friends, to help them bring foodstuff from Hungary and obtain locally made products to sell across the border. Similar dependencies on family both within and outside the household continued after the fall of state socialism. In his monograph unpacking workers' attempts at getting by in a Jiu Valley mining village and a Transylvanian industrial town, Kideckel (2008) outlined how family structures were at the heart of making ends meet during the large-scale economic and social changes of the 'transition'. Families adjusted their schedules, jobs, and diets to strategically secure their wellbeing and to safeguard their children's success. Far from being a frictionless process, these adjustments put considerable strain on relationships, practices, and even composition of families, with high rates of divorce, domestic violence, and marital conflict as a result.

This continued reliance on family to get by was echoed in my interlocutors' lives. It was family (and to a smaller extent friends, see Chapter 4) that made life abroad more manageable, both at the beginning and throughout. While these dependencies were prevalent, they failed to fit the model of a horizontal, interest-free relationship. Self-interest showed up regularly in my participants' claims and counter-claims about the duty to help family. The line between caring for someone and 'taking advantage' (*a profita*) was porous and fragile in their stories, and no other relational sphere was more fraught with this friction than that of family. While they initially signal the pervasiveness of mistrust (a concept I expand on in Chapter 4 and 6), it is by looking at what seems to be self-interested gestures and claims of being taken advantage of that we find important claims about the duty to help family and about kinship more broadly.

To unpack this, I introduce another brother of Camelia's, Florin, who was in his mid-thirties and had been living in the UK on and off for a few years when I met him. A short man with buzz-cut brown hair, Florin came to London to work in construction and initially lived in the Boian household, much like Camelia's other siblings. I remember Camelia's outrage with Florin after she returned from Romania in the summer of 2020, only a few months Florin moved away from her house in London. Unhappy about the conditions of his departure from the Boian household, Florin told several aunts about how Camelia had charged him rent for the spare room where he slept and subsequently 'she made

money off my back' (*a făcut bani de pe urma mea*). The women were outraged at the thought of a sister charging her brother money for rent. During her visit to Romania that summer, one of her aunts confided in Camelia about her brother's words. The woman was close to Camelia and doubted that she would ever take advantage of her brother in that way. 'Don't we also need to pay rent for this house?' Camelia exclaimed to me in outrage when retelling the story. Were it her house in Romania, she would of course not even dream of charging her brother rent. Moreover, her brother's account left out many of the sacrifices she had made. Camelia exclaimed how her brother slept on her duvets and pillows, used her bedding and towels, and ate off her plates when living in the house. 'But when he bought a new frying pan, he kept it in his cupboard' she added, smirking. When Camelia confronted her brother about the new purchase, he swiftly explained that it was *his* frying pan and therefore would prefer her not to use it. Camelia was left incredulous at this response since her brother had used her kitchen utensils and continued to do so, bar the shiny new frying pan which he stashed away in his allocated kitchen cupboard.

In the heat of the moment, anecdotes like these put me in an uncomfortable position of needing to choose a side in what felt like small domestic squabbles. I felt myself yearning to placate Camelia and join her in her outrage at her ungrateful brother. After all, the dishes in the shared kitchen substantiated her story. The chipped, mismatched plates told of the many instances of broken crockery sets that must have been used by ten people at a time. However, I too struggled with the role of self-interest in my role as a lodger in the Boian household. It was often that Camelia cared for me. She would call me if it got dark and I failed to return home from a day of fieldwork. She snuck little chocolates into my kitchen cupboard and made me tea when I was working from home. She cut my hair and gave me first pick whenever she received second-hand clothes from other Romanian women. Yet, these caring acts paled in comparison to the first instance when I felt that I too had been duped, and that the Boians acted solely in their self-interest. That was the only moment I came close to leaving their household and moving elsewhere.

I tensely walked to the supermarket, the only non-domestic sphere allowed during the national lockdown, one damp February evening in 2021. I did not need anything from the shop, but had to escape the house so that I could vent freely without being overheard. Speaking rapidly to my mother on the phone, I explained that I was ready to move out. It had all started a couple of weeks prior to that angry tirade between the supermarket shelves. One evening as I was preparing for bed, Marcel asked me what I made of welcoming more people into the house. I struggled to see his question as more than a joke. The house was full, after all. A young couple had just moved into what used to be Georgel's room. Crammed in with their toys, the older children slept in a tiny box room in bunk beds. Marcel, Camelia, and the baby slept in the adjacent bedroom where wardrobes overflowed with clothes, toys, and knick-knacks. With a puzzled look on my face, I answered that there was no room. What slipped my mind was that Camelia had previously moved the single bed where Georgel used to sleep into the living room, and tucked another single mattress underneath it. At the time, she justified it as a way to make more

space for the children to play. So, there was some more room, explained Marcel. I quickly rebutted the suggestion and argued that the house was already beyond capacity, which should not be taken lightly during a national lockdown.

This conversation came back clearly during my angry walk to the supermarket. An hour before I left the house, Camelia informed me that two men would temporarily sleep in the living room so that they could start a job in construction. She explained that they were not charging the men rent but were doing it out of a 'duty to help' (*trebuie să ajutăm*). One of the men had recently called Marcel to borrow money, who invited them to come to London and try out his luck in construction. While I initially believed this story, I was starting to doubt it. Camelia had let it slip that 'they already paid the money' (*deja au dat banii)*, making me doubt their charitable intentions to these new lodgers. She stressed that one of the men was their friend, that he was poor, struggled to find work in Romania, and he was from their village and therefore trustworthy. However, when I introduced myself to the man later that night, he asked me if I was Marcel's wife – hinting he was not a 'friend' after all.

Undoubtedly, Camelia and Marcel's status as head tenants offered them a degree of power in the house, which enabled them to make decisions defying other tenant's opinions, myself included. Alongside other topics like helping other Romanians (which I explore in the following chapter), the event above illustrates the role of self-interest within the action of helping others. In the moment, like Camelia's brother, I was blinded by the sense of betrayal resulting from the seeming self-interest folded into the Boians' relationship with me. My well-being seemed to come second to their self-interest – whether that was to help someone else or to have an additional income from the extra lodgers. Thankfully, I remained within the Boian household after that angry phone call to my mother. During the rest of my time in their household, I often reflected on this episode and unpacked the role of self-interest in our relationship[32] and in the Boians' relationships with their family and friends.

In her monograph of the Grecanici of Reggio Calabria, Pipyrou (2016) wrote about instrumentality and emotion as key components of both kinship and friendship. She argued that instrumentality sat at the heart of Grecanici kinship morality as the test of love, care, or respect towards your friends and family. It is by caring and helping family members that one shows their feelings, not by simply proclaiming them. In the same way, Romanians believe that actions speak louder than words when it comes to family and friendship. Rather than verbalising their emotions, they show the strength of kinship bonds and the unconditional love at their core through their actions. Yet, the interplay between instrumentality and emotion can also take a dark turn, as one's helping hand can be interpreted as nothing more than a self-interested action disguised as caring for the family. This much was apparent

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[32] It may be worth noting that self-interest shaped my relationship with the Boians not only within kinship and friendship, but also within ethnographic fieldwork. For example, my role in the Boian household would at times feel deeply self-interested as I was privy to very private moments and needed to decide whether these would count as 'data' or whether I was simply there as a housemate or friend.

in Georgel's story, with which this chapter started, and the complex power imbalances folded into his relationship with Camelia.

At first glance, some readers might see Camelia and Marcel's refusal to allow Georgel to leave the house as simply motivated by self-interest. Since Camelia charged Georgel rent for the room where he slept, his departure would remove a considerable part of the family's income. Georgel's room remained empty for a couple of months after his departure at Christmas. During these months, Camelia fretted about finding a replacement lodger and frequently changed her mind about the best way to do so. Alongside the rent, he also owed the Boians' money for the CSCS card, which he would be unlikely to repay after returning to Romania. Beyond these immediate material considerations, the arrangements between Georgel and Camelia shone a light onto a different kind of instrumentality, not removed from the norms of kinship altogether. Rather than motivated simply by self-interest, facilitating migration for Georgel and sub-letting a room in her house was also rooted in Camelia's duty to care for her brother. It was by acting in a seemingly self-interested way that Camelia could fulfil her duty to care for her brother. Providing him with shelter and ensuring he was in a familiar environment – away from 'temptations' or 'negative influences' like the ones she recounted during his previous time in London – could set him on the right path for the rest of his time abroad.

Ultimately, the relationship between the two siblings combined both self-interest and care as co-constitutive acts of 'doing family'. Camelia let Georgel the single room in their house not just as a means of paying rent, nor just as a way of caring for him – these functions were irreversibly combined in the act of caring for her brother abroad. The same applied for not allowing him to return to Romania on that Sunday in November. Keeping him for a month longer came with practical concerns about finding a replacement tenant before Christmas when most Romanians returned home for the holidays. It also made it more likely for the lad to pay off his debts. These reasons existed in parallel to more abstract imaginaries of the time he spent in London. Georgel's failure to remain in London would also reflect Camelia's failure in her duty to take care of him. In turn, Georgel's departure may threaten the Boians' own sense of themselves as successful in London, embodying a potential failure to which they too might succumb one day. A similar interplay of self-interest and care applied in the Boians' relationship to me, and the challenging episode I described above. It was not that Camelia and Marcel did not care for me or that they were simply self-interestedly trying to secure an additional income. They in fact ensured that the men only stayed for a few days, but still proceeded with their offer to help them despite my disagreement.

Self-interest therefore was not necessarily a negative aspect of kinship in a wholly utilitarian way. Neither was a duty to care for family just a positive factor in kin relations. Illustrated by Marcel picking up Georgel 'by the scruff of the neck' at the beginning of this chapter, caring for family could in fact manifest through violent acts and showcase the 'dark side of kinship' (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak, 2020:310) as anger and fury run parallel to love and care. Such emotions were equally constitutive to kinship for my interlocutors, and many of their reckonings with kinship norms surfaced

in violent or conflict-prone ways when living in a different country. It is to another aspect of this 'dark side of kinship' to which I now turn, asking what happens when relatives reject one's duty to help and what this means within the wider kinship universe for the Romanians I met.

The paradox of obligation

One final element remains in this discussion of Romanian kinship abroad through the practice of facilitating the migration of family members. I have already covered duty and obligation as the turning wheels of making and unmaking kinship in my interlocutors' lives, borrowing notions of patronage. To sidestep its utilitarian and functionalist undertones, I focused on the role of self-interest and care as co-constituent to Romanians' family relationships abroad. I now turn to another aspect where I diverge from the classic model of patronage, the patron-client dyad. For my interlocutors, kinship was not contained within dyadic relationships. Instead, it was situated within a wider kinship universe. To explain this, I borrow concepts from a cousin of patronage – hospitality – and zoom in on the performative elements of being a good host to one's family members in London. As Janet Carsten (2020) recently remarked, experiences of mobility and migration can help unveil the performative qualities of kinship, as individuals retrace the boundaries and expectations of kinship practices.

Similar to patronage which I briefly reviewed at the beginning of this chapter, hospitality is a highly coveted area of anthropological enquiry (Shryock, 2004, 2008, 2012; Candea, 2012; Candea and Da Col, 2012; Pitt-Rivers, 2012). While the interaction between host and guest remains at its heart, hospitality does not stop there, but instead envelops a wider social realm. Herzfeld denoted this wider sociality by labelling hospitality a 'shifter' (1987:77). While hospitality fundamentally gains meaning through the relationship between guest and host, Herzfeld explained that the nature of hospitality also shifts based on the audience to which tales of being hosted well or badly are told. In that sense, guests become 'poets' once they leave their host's house (Shryock, 2004:36) since their recounting of good or bad hospitality can either improve or ruin their host's reputation. As a social performance, the temporal and spatial aspects of hospitality emulate its role in the politics of reputation. Hospitality remains 'always partially unseen' (Shryock, 2004:59) since the guest's appraisal is delayed and often occurs elsewhere, as I would add, also applies to the preparations and debriefing on the part of the host. Since some elements of hospitality are always obscured, it is therefore key to examine hospitality gone wrong in order to understand how the assemblage operates, and to uncover the social relations constituting it (see also Shryock, 2012). For my participants, it was when experiences of hospitality soured that the social apparatus involved in making and unmaking kin became clearer.

When dwelling on the performative nature of hospitality, one mundane conversation with Camelia comes to mind. At the time it seemed like nothing more than minor gossip or petty annoyances, and did not even make it into my fieldnotes. When looking closer, however, this minor conversation aptly highlights what could be labelled a paradox of obligation – what happens when relatives reject one's duty to help. One late night in the autumn of 2020, I wandered into the kitchen to make a cup of

tea before bed. As soon as I walked in, Camelia ambushed me. She was dying to tell me something, but also seemed somewhat reserved. It was about Cristina, her youngest child's godmother. The Boians strategically crafted a network of godparents (*nani* or *cumetri*) and godparents-in-waiting (*moşi,* see more about *moşulica* in Chapter 2) for their young family in London, ranging from professionals over a decade their seniors to close friends around their own age who also had young children. This array of extended family relationships was often found around the Boians' dinner table, and seldom missed a celebration. Out of these relationships, Cristina played a key role in Camelia's life. The two women often called on each other for support since their children were of similar ages and enjoyed playing together. They were also caught in a competition in their roles of wives and mothers, and it was not uncommon that Camelia was irritated by Cristina's words or behaviours.

That time, Camelia explained, Cristina had definitely crossed the line. Wiping sleep from my eyes, I perched myself in the kitchen doorstep and listened quietly. Gesticulating heavily, Camelia recounted her recent telephone conversation with Cristina, after the children had been put to bed. The thorny subject was none other than Iulia, one of Camelia's younger sisters. I only met Iulia briefly at one of the children's birthday celebrations during my time in the Boian household. She and her partner came at the end of the day, once all the other guests had left. They stood gloomily at the table, absent-mindedly watched the cartoons playing on the TV and only spoke to the children. Avoiding her sister, Camelia busied herself in the kitchen and served them some leftovers from the grilled meats and pizza ordered from a Turkish takeaway earlier that day. The couple ate and left quickly. The relationship between the two sisters seemed to have deteriorated further since that cold and awkward visit.

Camelia had recently lost touch with her sister whom she knew returned to London after a brief stint in Romania. Despite not being on speaking terms, Camelia knew where Iulia worked, lived, and that she had recently been to the doctor after struggling to conceive. All the information came from Cristina who, to Camelia's annoyance, befriended her sister back when she still lived in the Boian household. However, on that evening, Cristina's phone call was more than a simple update about Iulia's whereabouts. Iulia and her partner did not have a duvet and linens in their new house and complained about it as such to Cristina, who bought and delivered some bedding to their door. To me, this anecdote seemed innocent at the time, even comforting to hear that Cristina was looking after her friend. Camelia however was furious. 'Why does she bother to tell me stuff like this?' she exclaimed. Camelia knew her sister was struggling, but she was not the one to make the first step: 'She has my [phone] number, she can call me if she needs something.' Yet, it was Cristina filling the role of carer that seemed to bother Camelia more than her sister's failure to reach out. In what seemed like an innocent phone call, Cristina had signalled to Camelia that she was failing to care for her family members who were younger and less experienced in the UK. By stepping into this role and solidifying it with expensive and intimate purchases (bedlinens and the like are intimate items that are often gifted by close family members in Romania), Cristina had seemingly cemented Camelia's failure to care for her sister. Different from previously casual comments and updates, this conversation struck a chord. It signalled to Camelia that

she was no longer fulfilling her duty to care for her sister. Given Cristina's proclivity for gossip, Camelia was certain that this failure would also be exposed to the Boians' wider network of friends and family in London.

The paradox of obligation makes the crux of this late night phone call. This concept refers to the social fallout of family members rejecting one's duty to help, and illustrates how this refusal can easily turn into accusations of one being a bad host or, conversely, a bad guest. For Camelia, her sister not calling to ask for help was a direct violation of her role as the older sister who was in a position to care for her siblings, especially when abroad. In turn, Cristina stepping into this role and providing support expanded the social stage where claims and counter-claims of obligation were played out. At the heart of the seemingly innocent telephone conversation between the two women sits the performative nature of caring for family. Rather than a simple act of reciprocity or mutuality, caring for family abroad was a delicate performance intended to sustain one's reputation and that of the entire family. Returning to Pipyrou's ethnography of Reggio Calabria, tending to both reputation and care was common in Grecanici kinship where looking after one's family was an exercise in both protecting and constructing family reputation (2016:88). In Camelia's case, it was not sufficient that she cared for her siblings when they first arrived in the UK, but her act of caring for them was closely examined (and hopefully commended) by her social network in London, whether relatives, godparents or friends. Her family's reputation as a whole was then placed under scrutiny, as well as her own efforts to honour the duty to care for family. Illustrated through Florin's example earlier in this chapter, the Boians' family network in Romania also became a spectator in this performance. When Florin told their aunts that Camelia charged him rent to 'make money off his back', her duty to help family members got stretched over a transnational stage. It was not just that one gives something to the other, but the evaluation of this 'gift' makes or breaks relationships within Romanians' social universe abroad. Should one make accusations of self-interest and maliciousness about a family member, the entire kinship universe becomes animated by it. It is to the makeup of this universe to which I turn next, drawing conclusions about how my participants' claims and counter-claims of 'doing family' hold wider political relevance for our understanding of people on the move.

What else is new? A brief reflection on transnational families

Two final points about kinship for Romanians in London emerge from this brief insight into the performative nature of caring for family. Firstly, rather than operating as a dyad as per the early discussions of patronage at the beginning this chapter, the duty to care for family abroad was rooted in a wider kinship universe that spanned nation-state borders. Obligations did not stop at the Boians' doorstep in London, but they were closely intertwined with the experiences and narratives of other family members, some of whom remained mobile between Romania and London and some who had never set foot in the UK themselves. Family members in Romania were more than just a transnational

audience to claims and counter-claims of kinship made by their mobile relatives. Instead, they served as both providers and recipients of care themselves within the wider transnational family. Brief examples from Camelia's life include her teenage siblings who often received gifts of clothes and electronics from her, or her parents who regularly sent her parcels of Romanian foodstuff (remember the contentious *sarmale* leaves in Chapter 2). This observation is not surprising given the rising attention awarded to transnational families in the field of migration studies (Foner, 1997; Parreñas, 2001, 2005; Chamberlain and Leydesdorff, 2004; Baldassar, 2008; Grillo, 2008; Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Chávez, 2017). Bryceson and Vuorela provided a useful definition of transnational families that has become somewhat standard in migration research:

> families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely 'familyhood', even across national borders (2002:3-4).

This exercise in mutual support and welfare can be harshly tested by external factors, such as war or oppressive immigration laws, and by the inequalities and power imbalances folded into families. Faced with restrictive cultural or legislative norms, transnational family practices however remain fluid, being made and remade through the relational practices of family members. Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) proposed a two-fold model to understand this process of 'doing' transnational family. On the one hand, families engage in 'frontiering', the work of tracing the boundaries between what is acceptable or not in experiences of caring for family abroad, much like the claims explored in this chapter. On the other hand, transnational families are also engaged in 'relativizing', the process through which individuals work out the nature of their family relationships and the role they play within it at different stages of the life cycle. By combining 'frontiering' and 'relativizing', family members reproduce the family as 'an imagined community with shared feelings and mutual obligations' (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002:14). In their introduction to a recent volume on family practices in migration, Montero-Sieburth and Mas Giralt (2021:4) built on this relational approach. They proposed the concept of 'migrant family practices' that surpasses the lacunae of transnationalism[33], instead reliant on the co-presence and intimacy that migrants craft in their everyday lives. To adequately understand migrant family practices, they suggest focusing on the relational aspect of family practices and on how individuals create, maintain or disrupt family ties everyday. Care notably plays a key role in these everyday practices, operating as an asymmetrical reciprocal exchange where caring acts circulate

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[33] My brief insight into transnational families at this point in the chapter is intentional. Rather than attempting to analyse the transnational nature of Camelia's family (an analytical approach blind spot often pointed out by critics of transnationalism), I instead try to use the transnational nature of these relationships to make a broader political point about why claims and counter-claims of kinship are an important analytical task for those seeking to understand experiences of mobility.

between family members, despite the distance that separates them (Baldassar and Merla, 2014:8). It is this asymmetrical reciprocity that I sought to tease out and understand in this chapter.

While the ethnography on which this chapter is based has not assumed a truly transnational methodology, it benefits from this brief insight into the literature on transnational families. The relational focus in studies of transnational families is crucial for unpacking Camelia's experiences and narratives of caring for family abroad, and the frictions around duty and obligation for the Romanians I met. By tracing the claims and counter-claims about being a 'good' host, I delved into my interlocutors' experiences of 'relativizing' as they determined and contested their specific roles within their family. Focusing on the performative nature of kinship showcased the practices of 'frontiering' where my participants traced what was acceptable when caring for family abroad. These processes also highlighted the flows of power in the social universe of Romanians in London. In their retelling of instances of faulty hospitality, Camelia's younger siblings – whether Georgel, Florin, or Iulia – enacted their own power over their sister. While Camelia was their senior and remained in a position of material and social advantage, the narratives and actions of her siblings risked ruining her reputation on a transnational scale and fracturing her identity as the caring elder sister. In Georgel's case, whose imminent departure we started from, the lad's decision to return to Romania invalidated Camelia's role as the gracious patron and host. In Florin's confession to his aunts back home, she risked being seen as committing the cardinal sin of taking advantage of family and using them for her own benefit. And lastly, in her conflict with Iulia, the younger sister's decision to ask for external help placed Camelia and the entire family in bad light for all to see.

Beyond its analytical usefulness, this relational focus of transnational families also highlights the political potential of tracing Romanians' familial disputes and expectations. Focusing on transnational families goes against the nation-state's conceptualisation of sedentary nuclear family households as the only unit of social organisation (Chávez, 2017). By tracing the everyday narratives of 'doing' family across different households in both London and Romania, I challenge the equation of families within a static, settled household, but instead understand them as fluid and mobile. Tracing relationships and value norms across nation-state borders also contributes to a more nuanced discussion of the wider 'politicisation of family' (Grillo, 2008:9) that often places migrant families at the core of political decisions around multiculturalism and integration. Immigration policy and legislation often define migrant families as the prime locale of integration, a highly volatile arena where children can be socialised to fit the mould of a 'good' citizen or where dangerous cultural values that go against those of the 'host' society can be reproduced. By shining a light onto the norms of duty and obligation, I tried to resist the temptation to replicate integration as the main outcome of family making for migrants. Instead, my interlocutors' narratives and experiences of duty and obligation contribute to their own identity making as good sisters and brothers, as per the examples from Camelia's life. Retaining this implicit focus on gender, a transnational approach to migrant families points out the need to overcome the methodological individualism often present in studies of migration that focus on a single male

individual and his perceived autonomy to move unencumbered (Kofman, 2004). Instead, the practices and norms of kinship described in this chapter showcased how it is both so-called 'migrants' and 'non-migrants' that make experiences of mobility meaningful and work through questions of belonging and reciprocity (see also Carling, 2008). The messy relational reality of caring for family abroad showcases how Romanians carry kinship norms and relationships across borders and painstakingly put them into practice.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I offered one potential answer to the complex question of what happens to kinship when people move to a different country. I chose the example of facilitating migration for family members to show how the complex norms of duty and obligation play out in the kinship universe of Romanians in London. This universe expanded beyond conventional notions of kinship, stretching across nation-state borders and escaping the boundaries of the nuclear family or the sedentary household, as has been made evident in the literature on transnational families to date (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak, 2020). In an effort to mirror my interlocutors' questions, I complemented these insights with concepts from the anthropological literature on patronage and hospitality and connected these to ethnographic examples from Camelia's attempts to help her siblings 'make something of themselves'. At first glance, ideals of duty and power imbalances likened the relationships I described to patronage relationships, 'reciprocal but unequal' (Pitt-Rivers, 1971:154) as it seemed that Camelia held all the cards in her role as the older, more settled sister. However, Camelia did not simply occupy the role of the powerful and self-interested patron in these stories. Instead, her attempts to help her siblings showcased the role played by self-interest in the act of caring for family members abroad. The resulting mixture of self-interest and care proved to be ethnographically contentious, exposing the 'dark side of kinship' (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak, 2020:310) as illustrated by the violent event I described at the start of this chapter. Finally, the kinship practices amounting to helping family members migrate proved to be highly performative, as attempts at being a good host or guest permeated the stories of Camelia and her siblings. This insight into the performative aspects of kinship helped me reflect on the political nature of these relational matters – as claims and counter-claims of caring for family defy the state-centred focus on migrant families as the locale for integration (Chávez, 2017). Instead, my aim was to put front and centre the very questions about family my interlocutors ask of each other and of themselves.

Echoes of kinship can be found throughout the rest of this thesis, and this chapter serves as a launchpad for the themes of reciprocity and morality that dominated the imaginaries and narratives of the Romanians I met. My ethnography showed that Romanians were constantly working through their experiences and ideals of relationships with one another, especially when it came to helping and being helped. Sometimes these relationships appeared as patronage, other times they seemed like charity, and

in some tense circumstances they were registered as brutally transactional and self-interested. The family served as the locale where these judgements became the most animated, perhaps unsurprisingly. In reckoning with the norms of duty and obligation that come with kinship, my participants undid normative understandings of family, showcasing the muddy underbelly of caring for family members and enacting kinship ties in an environment marked by precarity and adversity. In the next chapter, I continue this emphasis on reciprocity and morality, broadening my focus to the claims and practices of helping not just one's family, but helping other Romanians in London as well. To this end, I retain the focus on the claims and counter-claims of helping and being helped that I started in this chapter. The concept of duty appears again, but this time within the social realms of friendship and favours. Within these relationships, duty is still shaped by claims of brutal self-interest and conflict. By exploring these tensions, I introduce the slippery concept of mistrust and the warning I often received during my fieldwork – avoid and never trust other Romanians.

Chapter 4: 'I wasn't helped, I helped myself': The 'ordinary ethics' of helping other Romanians

On a cool afternoon in July 2021, I met Amalia in her family home, a cramped terraced house just off the busy high street. We talked for a couple of hours in her pristine living room, sipping on sickly sweet Nescafé cappuccinos from porcelain cups. Amalia and I had worked together at the Romanian food bank for a couple of months before sitting down for this interview. She spoke candidly about her family's life in the UK, carefully weaving a well-worn story of sacrifice, merit, and faith. Amalia and her husband, Ovidiu, arrived in the UK in 2010, earlier than most of my interlocutors. The couple had been married for sixteen years and had three children, with their youngest being born in the UK. Amalia and Ovidiu had both graduated from university in Romania. She studied theology, he read history. They met at university, got married, and had their first born by their third year. Moving abroad was never an ambition for the young family who enjoyed a quiet middle-class life in Romania. However, after the 2008 financial crisis, they could no longer rely on Ovidiu's generous salary as a car dealership director to make ends meet. 'After we got everything sorted, we are the *other way around*, first, we finished our house [in Romania] and then we left everything and came here', Amalia explained, setting her family apart from the many Romanians who work in the UK in the hope of building a house back home.

Set on offering more to their growing family, the couple moved to the UK when their second child was only eleven months old. Once they arrived in London, Amalia and Ovidiu needed to start over. He worked long, tiring days in construction to support the family, while she looked after the children. Some friends took them in when they first arrived and Amalia's family of four crammed into a small bedroom in a house with other Romanians. Amalia recalls taking the baby for walks in the local park at five in the morning to avoid waking up their hosts and the other tenants. After eight years of living in shared houses across North-West London, Amalia and the family moved to their current house. At the time of our interview, Ovidiu ran a small but successful construction company that often employed other Romanians, while Amalia combined a few part-time jobs with volunteering and childcare. Their teenage sons did well in school, and Amalia worked hard to ensure her younger daughter followed in their footsteps. The family enjoyed a comfortable life with occasional international holidays and held high hopes of their children's futures at top British universities.

Although I expected her to speak at length about her role at the foodbank, Amalia instead brought up their 'duty to help' (*trebuie să ajutăm)* other Romanians in London outside of her volunteering. Like Camelia and Marcel, this 'duty to help' first and foremost applied to family members and the everyday practices of caring for them during and after the *acomodare,* the period of settling in the UK. The 'duty to help' did not stop there for Amalia and Ovidiu, since the couple helped many other Romanians, acquaintances and strangers alike. Over their twelve years in London, Amalia and Ovidiu helped over forty Romanians navigate life in the capital:

Amalia: We brought over *a few generations* that we needed to help. So, we are *their mother and father*! We know everything [about them]…

Ana-Maria: How many people do you mean by 'generations'?

Amalia: Many, so many! Our parents were the last ones, but until them, we had three rounds of cousins, a nephew, who asked [for help with] everything, including fill in my census, my car [insurance] is expiring, I have a [doctors'] appointment…

Ana-Maria: So, all of these things, including doctors' appointments?

Amalia: Everything, even too much! Including "I need to register my daughter for nursery". Who does it? Ovidiu. It all falls on him. He deals with the paperwork, I mostly nag him.

When he sees me, he can already tell, he says: "What is it now? What do I need to do?". I had the bad habit, for the first five years, being friendly or whatever. I think we had over forty Romanians cross our doorstep. "I got a [traffic penalty] fine, what can I do?" And from none of them, without [charging] any money,' she added nervously.

Without [money], by no means!

"You know, what do I do now that I got a [traffic penalty] fine?"

"You know, I should change my phone [number], what will you teach me to do?"

And I brought them in, and I handed them to him. Until I realised that many people were using me. And, it hurt. There were some things that hurt me. So I said, that's it, from now on, they have to get by themselves because I realised I wasn't doing them any favours. Once I taught them how to eat, I needed to let them eat for themselves.'

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In this chapter, I unpack the experiences of helping and being helped by other Romanians and the moral norms underpinning these practices of reciprocity. Amalia and Ovidiu's reckonings with the 'duty to help' other Romanians were echoed by most of my participants, whether in interviews, everyday chitchat or philosophical musings over a glass of wine. From filling in online forms to hosting them in their house, my interlocutors were routinely helping other Romanians. Many relied on their co-nationals in turn to find work or accommodation, source childcare, complete bureaucratic updates, and navigate other aspects of life in London. These practices of reciprocity expanded outside of the kinship boundaries traced in the previous chapter, to weave intricate webs of favours that connected friends, neighbours, acquaintances and even complete strangers. At first glance, my interlocutors' reliance on

favours could be seen as a simple extension of the connections at work in Romania, documented by an abundant ethnographic literature on clientelism in Romania and in the wider postsocialist context. In short, people rely on one another, and often on more important or better-placed others, to make ends meet and cope in the face of faulty governance or a failing economy. Given the ubiquity of these practices in the literature, a potential next step would be to argue that Romanians simply take these practices abroad with them. Drawing on the recent literature on favours, I argue that stopping at this conclusion would miss out on a significant dimension of the 'duty to help' – the moral obligations amounting to these practices of reciprocity. I use the concept of 'ordinary ethics' (Lambek, 2010) to unpack these practices and to show how morality, ambivalence and indifference were woven into my participants' attempts to help other Romanians in London. Rather than a mark of migrant or ethnic solidarity, the complex moral obligations behind the 'duty to help' were grounded in a rhetoric of mistrust. Like Amalia above, many of my interlocutors wondered when it would be time to 'let them eat for themselves' and berated themselves for being 'friendly or whatever' when they felt they had been taken advantage of by other Romanians. I explore this mistrust in the literature before showcasing how it is too, in part, an expression of the 'ordinary ethics' at play in my interlocutors' lives.

The *buletin* and the bed under the stairs

While Amalia appeared convinced that she needed to 'let them eat for themselves', the rest of our conversation revolved around the many instances in which her and her husband continued to help other Romanians. Suddenly, Amalia stood up to pick something up from Ovidiu's makeshift home office in a corner of their living room. On the small desk, next to an old printer, sat a *buletin*. A *buletin* is a National Identity Card issued for free by the Romanian state once a citizen turns 15. Accepted as a form of ID for international travel prior to Brexit, many Romanians in low-paid work preferred using their *buletin* to enter the UK, rather than securing costly passports that were reserved for those with more disposable income. The photo on the worn plastic card showed the face of a tanned, young man in his early twenties from a village in Southern Romania. Ovidiu was helping the lad find work, Amalia explained proudly, so he kept hold of his *buletin* to help him get his *acte* ('papers') for working in construction. She sat down next to me on the hard sofa, leaving the *buletin* on the coffee table between us. While Ovidiu generally dealt with paperwork, Amalia explained that she concerned herself with the more mundane aspects of helping Romanians who found themselves in a tight spot:

> Although there's already five of us, here, under the stairs, we've always had a bed. It didn't matter who [it was], I needed to wash and cook, day in and day out. As soon as the last one left, I dropped off the kids at school, I took the day off work, and put an end to the bed!

Amalia expelled a daring, triumphant laugh. I struggled to imagine another person living in the family's dining room. Countless children's books and clothes, tinned goods, empty suitcases, and bulging plastic bags were carefully stored across the room. Amalia's thirteen-year-old son barely fit at a desk under the stairs where he usually played video games during my visits. I could hardly imagine an adult man sleeping in that space. The 'duty to help' however went further than taking its toll on the crammed household space. Amalia explained that she constantly worried about the practicalities of having a lodger:

> Why should I always think about washing powder, about a packed [lunch]? I wonder whether he has salami for his packed [lunch], bread, and so on?

> One of them *even* waited for me to make him coffee and everything. The other one at least had the decency to make his own [coffee] but there were days and days. When a cousin broke his leg, where should he stay? He came *here*, we kept him for three months. Another one came [from Romania], also *here*.

> And I used to come along: "Whose socks are these?" Because I knew about the t-shirts, they were: pile, pile, pile, Amalia gestured, moving her hands rapidly up and down.

> Then, *the* question then came up: "Do I leave your underwear folded and you pick it up? Or what?"

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

This further foray into Amalia's experiences provides an insight into the variety of practices that amounted to the 'duty to help' other Romanians. Most of the Romanians I met had, at some point, been helped by their co-nationals with room and board, finding a job, sub-letting a room, or getting their *acte*. Their narratives inextricably combined a range of diverse practices, with being hosted in someone's home listed alongside a friend making a few phone calls to find them a job. The 'duty to help', to return to Amalia's phrase, therefore encompassed a variety of practices, some of which became more visible than others and came with specific obligations. Before exploring the moral implications of helping other Romanians, I unpack the different practices encompassed by the 'duty to help' using two helpful objects from Amalia's narrative above – the *buletin* and the bed under the stairs.

The *buletin* serves as an apt symbol with which to open the discussion of helping other Romanians, since bureaucracy was one of the most significant realms within which the 'duty to help' operated for my interlocutors. The importance of bureaucracy in my interlocutors' lives is perhaps unsurprising given the extensive scholarship in migration studies focused on documents and 'paper trails' (Horton and Heyman, 2020). This growing scholarship naturally reflects many nation states' extensive preoccupation with documentation and the bureaucratic and biometric border regimes underpinning the 'hostile environment' in the UK and beyond (De Genova, 2010; Kanstroom and Menjívar, 2014; Crawley *et al.*, 2017; Humphris and Sigona, 2019; Sigona *et al.*, 2021). What

anthropologists offer to discussions of documents and bureaucracy is the observation that 'documents never stand simply for themselves' (Reeves, 2013:520). Albeit seemingly fixed and unbending, legal frameworks and their implementation allow space 'beyond the document' (Kelly, 2006:92). Favours occupied this space beyond the document for many of the Romanians I met in London. Obtaining their *acte* through their connections served as a running thread in my interlocutors' stories of arriving in the UK, whether 'papers' referred to applying for a National Insurance number or registering for self-employment. Within the Boian household, young men intent on driving for Uber often huddled around our dinner table where Marcel explained how to register for self-employment or how to secure a taxi licence. I often played the role of bureaucratic consultant myself (outside of my formal caseworker role) by helping my participants with a range of bureaucratic tasks: updating their passport numbers for the EUSS, booking an appointment at the Romanian Consulate, or applying for Student Finance.

This intersection of favours and bureaucracy featured in previous studies of Romanian migration where compatriots acted as intermediaries to employment and as bureaucratic mediators overall. In Hartman's (2008) study of Romanian agricultural workers in Spain, the greenhouses of Almeria were populated with the help of intermediaries who arranged wages with Spanish employers on behalf of their co-nationals. The prevalence of intermediaries in those early days of Romanian migration morphed into a lucrative niche for so-called Romanian 'accountants' (*contabili*) in London (see Figure 7). Similar profit-driven advisers operated among other migrant groups in London, for instance Garapich (2008) documented how 'immigration advisers' appeared after Poland's accession to the EU to assist Poles with securing status in the UK. Such 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980) not only assisted Romanians with bookkeeping, but they also wielded the power to validate one's attempts at fashioning themselves into a deserving, fiscally-responsible migrant. As Vicol (2020) recently attested, registering for self-employment allowed Romanians in London to exit exploitative work arrangements, secure a right of residence in the UK, and open new avenues for further studies or entrepreneurship by making them eligible for welfare or Student Finance. The focus in this literature is often on the exploitative practices that this system of intermediaries engenders. In my role as a caseworker, I also witnessed how intermediaries or 'accountants' turned into over-exigent managers or exploitative patrons, using the power they held over their co-nationals' bureaucratic footprints for their own gain. In this chapter, I ask what makes these practices so morally powerful within the imaginary of the 'duty to help'.

Figure 7: Sign advertising accountancy services ('contabil autorizat') to Romanians on a Barnet high street. The sign also uses the Romanian flag.

The image of the *buletin* above is especially helpful in this respect. At first glance, Ovidiu keeping the only form of ID of a young man he did not know is reminiscent of the patronage scenarios I briefly described in the previous chapter. If he were an unscrupulous employer, Ovidiu could easily withhold the young man's *buletin* in exchange for him working for cheap in his company, a situation I often encountered in my casework. Beyond these risks, what makes the image so powerful is the unexpected presence of bureaucracy within a private, domestic sphere. Should Ovidiu be one of the numerous 'accountants' who peppered the local high streets, the practice would appear less conspicuous. However, the presence of the *buletin* inside Amalia and Ovidiu's family home counters the formalised and regimented norms associated with bureaucracy (Weber, 1978). However, this mixture of the domestic and bureaucratic realms is precisely why the Romanians I met relied on favours to deal with bureaucracy. The familiarity of connections helped make complicated forms and paperwork intelligible, and grounded them in a familiar system of obligation.

For the young man whose face featured in the *buletin*, the first obligation would be to remain grateful to Ovidiu for his help and to one day repay it in kind. However, expectations of being repaid or compensated did not feature in Amalia or Ovidiu's narratives. In the opening vignette, Amalia clarified that she and Ovidiu never asked for money for rent or for their helping hand. While this is in

part due to her family's faith and the religious values associated with helping without expecting a return, it is also because another, more powerful obligation surfaced in this situation. The more stirring obligation that accompanied the *buletin* revolved around the duty to use Ovidiu's helping hand to become economically active. As Amalia explained at the beginning of this chapter, her efforts to 'teach them how to eat' came part and parcel with an effort to 'let them eat for themselves'. The most important obligation of the young man helped by Ovidiu would be to become and remain economically active, to continue 'eating for himself' based on the helping hand extended by Amalia and Ovidiu. In short, helping other people get their *acte* amounted to more than obtaining a document, but rather to help them become economically active or able to 'feed themselves'.

The *buletin* also showcases how these bureaucratic helping hands that featured in many Romanians' stories were inherently gendered. Similar to Ovidiu's example above, it was mostly Romanian men who helped each other navigate how to become and remain economically active. In truth, bureaucracy was not inherently a masculine space for my interlocutors. Whenever it intersected with care work or boredom, it became a highly feminine endeavour. While Marcel helped his brother secure a taxi licence for Uber driving, Camelia spent endless hours accompanying her siblings to their National Insurance number interviews or to nearby GP surgeries for registration. These processes requiring time and patience were often delegated to the Romanian women I met, but these often missed from my interlocutors' accounts of being helped by other Romanians. The other material symbol of the 'duty to help' included in Amalia's narrative above – the bed under the stairs – speaks more to this realm of direct, yet often obscured help.

While Ovidiu dealt with forms and paperwork, Amalia concerned herself with the more mundane aspects of helping other Romanians. In her account above, the 'duty to help' took a material and embodied form as the bed under the stairs. The bed, the 'salami and bread', and the piles of clean clothes stood as clear evidence of her efforts to care for the temporary lodgers occupying the space under the stairs. These material entities were doubled by an invisible, gendered labour: making and unmaking the bed under the stairs, preparing packed lunches, and laundering dirty clothes. Although operating within the same sphere as the bureaucratic helping hands aiming to teach Romanians how to 'eat for themselves', this direct form of help was often invisible. Illustrated in the theoretical works on social reproduction described in the literature review, this absence is rooted in a false binary (see Introduction). Rather than existing in a separate domain, social reproduction is constitutive and fundamental to paid employment, reproducing labour through painstaking care and work that is often made invisible. In the words of Silvia Federici, 'the immense amount of paid and unpaid domestic work done by women in the home is what keeps the world moving' (2020:xvi). It is this domestic work that is neatly contained by the image of the bed under the stairs.

However important this domestic work was for sustaining the labour and bodies of Romanians in their hour of need, these forms of direct help are conspicuously missed from my participants' accounts of their lives in London. Most of the Romanians I spoke to mentioned help with *acte*, but none

dwelled on the food they ate when looking for work or who made the coffee they drank every morning. I can document these practices here only because of the space of complaint that the 'duty to help' provided for women like Amalia, and for a handful of other Romanian women whom I got to know more closely. This space of complaint is rooted in the 'ordinary ethics' I seek to uncover in this chapter. That is, Amalia could complain about the 'duty to help' because it was located within a set of contested norms that left the activity of helping other Romanians open to debate and criticism. While the Romanian women I knew rarely complained about caring for their family members for fear of violating their obligations as good wives, mothers or sisters,[34] the 'duty to help' opened up some space for complaint about caring for other Romanians. For Amalia, the material and practical aspects of helping other Romanians at times felt uncomfortable and demeaning. Laundering and folding the men's underwear enlisted an uncomfortable intimacy and shame, which she recounted with ridicule and daring. Despite their seeming invisibility, the mundane inflections of the 'duty to help' also came with different obligations and expectations from those of guesthood or kinship. In Amalia's case, she agreed to care for the lodgers sleeping under the stairs, but not as you would care for a guest. The example of the men waiting for her to make them coffee is a particularly useful illustration. While Romanian women would never expect or indeed allow a guest to make their own coffee, Amalia expected that her lodgers would *at least* make their own coffee in the morning. While Amalia may make coffee for her husband or for visiting relatives, the lodgers under the stairs did not elicit the same courtesy.

In this brief exploration of the many actions amounting to the 'duty to help', two distinct sets of practices emerged out of Amalia and Ovidiu's experiences of helping their co-nationals. On the one hand, a bureaucratic helping hand surfaced via the symbol of the *buletin*. Help with securing one's *acte* was necessary to 'let them eat for themselves,' to borrow Amalia's phrase. Helping compatriots register for self-employment or get their National Insurance number therefore amounted to more than the documents themselves, instead opening an opportunity for economic activity and imagined independence from the web of favours amounting to the 'duty to help'. In stark contrast, a more direct and mundane form of help emerged under the symbol of the bed under the stairs. This domestic, caring work made evident the interdependence underlining efforts to 'teach them how to eat', to once again quote Amalia. Reliant on often invisible, domestic work, this type of help actively reproduced the labour and bodies of the Romanians who crossed Amalia's and Ovidiu's doorstep. Unlike other forms of gendered labour encountered in this thesis so far, this type of help was openly contested by the Romanian women who, like Amalia, grew tired of washing and cooking 'day in and day out'. This distinction between different realms of help provides a useful background to the discussions of the 'duty to help' in this chapter and lays the foundation for the complex moral norms governing this exchange of favours. In the next section, I briefly revisit the ethnographic record to situate the 'duty to help' in

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[34] Camelia was an exception because of our close relationship, which offered me a privileged insight into the complaints of Romanian women about gendered labour and kinship explored in Chapters 2 and 3.

historical context and draw on recent literature on favours to develop my argument about the social and moral dimensions of helping other Romanians.

An extension of 'unruly coalitions'?

At first glance, the 'duty to help' described by Amalia and the complex web of favours underpinning it could be traced back to the ubiquity of favours in Romanian society and in the postsocialist context more broadly. Often referred to under the top-down terms of 'clientelism' or 'corruption', numerous ethnographies document how Romanians relied on their informal social connections, often with more important or better-placed others, to get by in the face of an unreliable or faulty state, both during and after socialism (Chelcea, 2002; Verdery, 2003; Kideckel, 2008; see Introduction). For example, ethnographers documented how landmark legal processes such as land restitution relied on the patronage of local elites and reproduced many socialist power structures (Mungiu-Pippidi and Althabe, 2002; Dorondel, 2005, 2016). This continued reliance on what Katherine Verdery called 'unruly coalitions' (1996:193) continues to impact Romanians' everyday lives, for instance in their attempts to make a livelihood (Constantin, 2005; Mateescu and Chelcea, 2005; Kideckel, 2008) or to access services such as state-provided healthcare (Stan, 2012). Marcel, for example, angrily recounted how he could not get his taxi business off the ground before coming to the UK because the mayor in his native village monopolised the transport licences used for such businesses (see Chapter 1). A few years later, he discovered that the man started his own taxi business. Although outraged by this injustice, Marcel and Camelia often deployed favours themselves during their visits to Romania. For instance, they preferred to treat their eldest daughter's health problems in Romania, where they could call on an acquaintance who was a doctor in the nearest town to obtain a next-day appointment, rather than wait for a long time for an appointment with the NHS.

Given this ubiquity of favours in the ethnographic record and in my participants' experiences, a swift conclusion could be that my interlocutors' reliance on connections to get by in London is simply a transnational extension of their reliance on the very same connections in Romania. This is of course an accurate statement in part, as their actions cannot be separated from their experiences and relationships in Romania, nor can they be plucked out of the historical and political context of their lives in a postsocialist country. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the messy matrix of transnational relationships, mainly following kinship lines, significantly impacted practices of reciprocity and care for family in my participants' lives. It would therefore be flawed to assume that other relationships, whether friends, old colleagues, acquaintances, or neighbours, stopped somewhere between Romania and the UK. When speaking of calling in favours or offering help, most of my interlocutors referred to someone they previously knew in Romania, or someone recommended by an acquaintance or friend. Besides these transnational relationships, my participants' experiences of using connections to sidestep a faulty state continued to shape their interactions with the state while in the

UK (which I explore in the next chapter). During my role as a caseworker, some of the beneficiaries I worked with grew frustrated because they could not 'meet' a civil servant in person who could help them, perhaps by slipping in a good word or a box of chocolates. On some occasions, I occupied the position of a useful connection myself, as shown when a beneficiary showed up for an appointment with a big cake covered in whipped cream or when another beneficiary routinely invited me over for a barbeque at her family's house at the end of our phone calls about Universal Credit. It is therefore warranted to situate my interlocutors' reliance on connections within the same register of the ethnographies I briefly describe above (see the Introduction for a more detailed literature review).

If we return to Amalia and Ovidiu's story described at the start of this chapter, their practices and narratives of helping 'a few generations' of Romanians appear as an extension of the informal connections featuring in the ethnographic record. The 'duty to help' seemingly marked Amalia and Ovidiu as parental figures turned bureaucratic consultants for many Romanians in their corner of London, from close family members to complete strangers. Rather than a one-off process of helping with *acomodare*, their help expanded to engulf a range of welfare or bureaucratic updates and adapted to the life changes of their beneficiaries. What at first started with appointments for National Insurance numbers changed to include enrolling children in nursery or scheduling an MOT. Amalia's and Ovidiu's help straddled a few different realms besides bureaucracy, as they also provided advice, emotional support, and material goods such as clothes and foodstuff to those in need. These activities located them in somewhat of a patronage relationship where they became the 'mother and father' of their many beneficiaries. In their role as more 'settled' migrants due to their long tenure in London, Amalia and Ovidiu became prized connections for those who may have held more social prestige, such as seniority, under other circumstances. However, Amalia and Ovidiu also benefited from the help they gave to those who were starting out or struggling. For instance, in the case of their latest beneficiaries, Ovidiu's mother and father (or 'our parents' as Amalia put it above) came to the UK to supplement their retirement earnings, but also to support the family with childcare. As to the young men who Ovidiu helped, they sometimes started out as employees at his construction firm (whether this was economically lucrative or not was up for debate in Amalia's opinion). On the face of it therefore, the 'duty to help' as illustrated by Amalia and Ovidiu could swiftly be relegated to Ledeneva's 'economy of favours' (1998) on the same par with *blat*, the use of personal networks to sidestep procedure and obtain access to desired goods or services in the face of constant shortages. Tracing the importance of connections in Romanians' lives, a rather swift conclusion could be that helping other Romanians abroad was nothing more than another *blat*-like activity, an extension of their practices and narratives of using informal connections to get by.

Favours as social acts

Drawing on the recent literature on favours, I identify two significant drawbacks of stopping at this attempt at mere classification. The first point is concerned with epistemology, linked to recent calls for

an anthropology of how people 'strive to create the good in their lives' (Robbins, 2013:475). Focusing solely on using connections as a survival strategy risks falling within the 'anthropology of suffering' (Laidlaw, 2014:31) which has neatly replaced exoticism and cultural alterity with a deep interest in experiences of exclusion, violence, illness, and poverty. This move towards a 'suffering slot' (Robbins, 2013:448) would have a twofold implication for the representation of my participants, derived from their postsocialist background and their mobility respectively. First, it would risk falling within the regrettable ethnographic tradition that renders postsocialist individuals and populations as 'little more than victims of the hardships of the post-1989 economic restructuring' (Henig and Makovicky, 2017:11). To describe using informal connections as nothing else but as an attempt to escape poverty and misery flattens the very substance of these practices, and conceals the freedom and ethical judgments behind them (Rakowski, 2016). Focusing on connections as the arsenal of the suffering yet cunning postsocialist subject also risks substantiating the ideological baggage of the 'benevolent colonialism' (Sampson, 2002:31) left in the wake of numerous anti-corruption campaigns in Romania, as well as in other Eastern European countries. A focus on the informality of these connections alone risks reproducing what Čarna Brković called the ills of the 'systemic' approach to clientelism (2017b: 65). In documenting how connections represent a rational or reasonable strategy to navigate a faulty state apparatus or flawed economy, 'systemic' accounts of clientelism risk portraying countries like Romania as immature democracies or economies that are yet to join the ranks of Western European countries. In short, if using connections is nothing more than surviving in a broken democracy or economy, fixing the flawed market or shoddy governance would surely eradicate the need for such informal connections. In this and the following chapter, I hope to provide a different account to my interlocutors' lives in the UK, to showcase how favours are indeed necessary to make ends meet in London. However, this was not solely due to my interlocutors' postsocialist past, but also because of the political and economic inequalities present in their so-called 'host' country and the ever-deepening 'hostile environment'. The second implication for portraying my interlocutors within the 'suffering slot' stems from the archetype of the 'suffering migrant' (Sayad, 2004). As Katerina Rozakou attests about the Moria refugee camp in Greece, ethnographers risk becoming complicit by reproducing the very same categories they seek to write against, especially in the dominant representations and aesthetics of suffering which are so abundant to 'crisis scholarship' (2019:79). In focusing on favours and connections as more than strategic ways to escape misery, I hope to avoid this characterisation of my interlocutors as little more than suffering migrants highly dependent on better-placed others to get by.

Alongside these concerns of epistemology, a focus on informal connections as nothing more than an extension of the economy loses sight of a significant dimension of the 'duty to help'. It risks providing a teleological analysis, focused solely on the function of actions such as hosting newly arrived Romanians or helping them find work. In short, it risks explaining away a key dimension of providing and asking for favours – their role in the crafting of personhood. The recent literature on favours provides a useful framework to further analyse this social and moral dimension of the 'duty to help'.

Rather than only exploring their pseudo-economic and transactional nature, recent contributions argue that favours represent social forms in their own right, imbued with ethical and affective dimensions (see a more detailed literature review in Introduction). Notably, Henig and Makovicky conceptualised favours 'primarily as social acts' (2017:3) that can have profound economic outcomes without being wholeheartedly explained by a transactional analysis. Favours are therefore defined by a specific kind of sociality that combines not only the helper and the helped, but also their understanding of the world around them – their claims and experiences of how the world is (survival) and how it should be (ethics). In short, what the literature on favours offers is a link between connections and morality, turning favours into a moment of ethical reflection needed for the crafting of personhood. Writing comparatively about higher education practices in Russia and Mongolia, Caroline Humphrey (2012) similarly explained how favours presented an opportunity to carve oneself into a particular kind of moral person. Taking the form of 'veering', providing favours in higher education acted as confirmation of one's ingenuity and social standing, turning favours into 'an independent mode of acting that is initiatory, extra, ethical, and gratuitous, rather than being a simple expression of a previous relationship' (Humphrey, 2012:23). This inherent moral dimension of favours is key to how social relations are maintained, and can be missed out of analyses focused solely on the mechanisms behind an 'economy of favours' (Ledeneva, 1998).

An added focus on the moral dimension of favours showcases the affective and moral dimension of helping other Romanians. Unlike Humphrey's participants, my interlocutors did not take pride in practices such as 'veering'. Their claims about the 'duty to help' were highly contested and irreversibly combined ambivalence, refusal, and morality. This combination of indifference and moral obligation can be seen to amount to 'an economy of indifference' rather than 'an economy of favours', to borrow Madeleine Reeves' apt formulation (2017:81). In her discussion of the contested favours operating behind Kyrgyz migrant accommodation in Moscow, Reeves (2017) asked what happens when one's expectations of being favoured run up against another person's inability or unwillingness to help. For her participants, it was an obligation rooted in the customary law of *salt*, a term usually associated with care in the domestic realm, that fuelled the provision of help (*jardam*) rather than calculation or economic rationality. She defined obligation as more than norms regulating behaviour, but as providing 'socially recognised framework for understanding how certain categories of person (for example, a white-bearded elder, a grieving widow, a schoolchild addressing an older sibling) should behave and be addressed' (Reeves, 2017:79). In the highly monetised and precarious urban economy in Moscow, the tensions arising between obligation and practice became exacerbated. For 'big tenants' running de facto migrant hostels in small apartments, the provision of *jardam* straddled both care and economic exchange, showing how neither term can account for the affective and moral encounter behind such practices. Instead, these practices remained highly contested ethnographically, showcasing the analytical importance of paying heed to the moral dimension of favours. It is this moral dimension to which I turn next, unpacking how ambivalence and obligation got tangled into one of my interlocutors' experiences of being helped, as well as helping, other Romanians in London.

'Help him because you were also helped'

I first met Emanuel, or Manu for short, one morning in August 2021 when he picked up a car he had recently bought from Marcel. The cherry red car had been parked outside my window for a long time, and Marcel asked me to liaise with Manu while the Boians were in Romania. I hopped in the car while Manu drove it around the block and later watched as he lifted the bonnet to check the engine. We got to chatting, and Manu agreed to meet for an interview. We met a couple weeks later in a shopping mall in Harrow, a popular place for Romanians living in the area, and sat down by the window in a chain café tucked away from the hustle and bustle. A dark-haired man in his thirties with a wispy moustache, Manu spoke candidly about his upbringing in Romania and his experiences abroad, which stretched from Italy and Spain to as far as the United States before arriving in London. At his parents' insistence, Manu graduated from university in Romania where he studied engineering and economics, but he later dropped out before finishing his Master's degree. After working for a few years as a quality control engineer and a freelance salesman, Manu founded a travel agency with his friends. The agency initially enjoyed great success, with the website still featuring various celebrity endorsements. However, the friendships behind the agency slowly started to crack, which ended with Manu, one of the original founders, being squeezed out of the organisation after a year.

Manu arrived in London in September 2016 after this fallout, heartbroken after his girlfriend refused to accompany him to the UK, and still nursing the consequences of his parents' divorce after 25 years of marriage. Faced with the substantial debts accrued during his year of entrepreneurship, Manu needed to make money quickly, an unlikely prospect in Romania. He decided to try his luck in the UK and reached out to some acquaintances in London, but none wrote back:

> I didn't have any *cunoștințe*, I didn't have anyone to tell me [what to do], I need to start from the bottom and with the money that I had, and I needed to hold a tight grip on them.

Manu sold his camera and laptop, used some of the money to get a one-way coach ticket to the UK, and kept £300 for his first month in London. He safeguarded the cash since he did not know when he would find work. However, one thing was certain. Manu swore he would never work for other Romanians, to which he referred as *țepari*, a derogatory term loosely translated as conmen. For the first few nights, Manu slept in a train station. He jokingly recalled his fear about becoming 'a homeless man pushing a trolley', an image borrowed from the early 2000s American films popular on Romanian TV.

A few days after his arrival, Manu heard back from Radu, an old friend who lived in London with whom he had lost touch, who offered to meet him in the train station. When Radu asked about his accommodation, Manu laughed and gestured around. His friend took him in immediately: 'Didn't you also take me in when my parents kicked me out?' Manu had hosted Radu in his shared dorm room at university years before. The two friends shared a single mattress in an old bunk bed for three weeks, to

the annoyance and homophobic jokes made by Manu's roommates. Once Radu took Manu in, the two men needed to share a single bed once again, this time in a house on the outskirts of London, home to six other adults and a few young children. Since Radu returned from work in the early hours of the morning, Manu soon devised a workaround for their sleeping arrangements. He would go to bed early and vacate the bed when his friend arrived from work. In the early morning when the house was quiet, Manu researched how to get his life in London going. He had set himself a target of earning £2,000 per month to help him pay off his debts in six months. After about a month, he managed to open a bank account, got issued a National Insurance Number, and eventually found work as a self-employed Amazon delivery driver. Despite being helped by Radu, that time instilled a lot of disappointment in Manu:

> When I was staying at his [Radu's] place, I had a toxic thought, that someone had to help me before I helped myself. For instance, say, I would meet you, and you have been here for a long time, I am new, we get to know each other and we grow close. And you know that you have your own responsibilities every day: a job, other stuff, responsibilities. But I have the expectation that you will find me a job, and if possible, you would also help me get my papers. I had these expectations because I did not know how things worked, I thought that's what it would be like. So, [I expected] that Radu, my friend, he would go [out of this way], he would take me to [the appointments], he would show me [how] it all [worked]. And it was actually the exact opposite, he said: "Look, this is the CityMapper app, this is mobile data, and with these two, you can go anywhere. And this is the Oyster card, I will put some money on it for you. You can go into this and this Zone. And he gave it to me and… Good luck! Now I can see that he wasn't at fault for this, but it was my fault, and the way that I saw things and the expectations I had from him. But I didn't say anything [at the time], I held a grudge.

These expectations stood in stark opposition to Manu's own practices of helping other Romanians, which included lending money, finding work, and even driving them to the airport for free. Since he was 'given a chance' in the UK, Manu helped other Romanians, and it made him feel good. After paying off his debts, he was so dedicated to helping others that he ended up loaning as much money as his initial debts. Clearly stating that he was not sorry for helping Romanians, especially his brother and sister, Manu explained he got 'carried away by his emotions':

> Because I said, well, if I made it and this [person] is asking for my help, they're in a situation [snaps fingers], c'mon, brother, *help him because you were also helped*. Help him, but this is what I observed. You don't always need to help people with money. You sometimes only need to help them with a kind word, with [sharing your] experiences, or with a chat. And then let them go and see if they get going. If I think about it for a bit, I was also pushed when I got here, encouraged by Radu, *I wasn't helped, I helped myself*. I mean, I was simply pushed in the right direction, he told me: "Take this and figure it out, look it up yourself". And it was up to me to put in the work and figure out. If I didn't do this, I probably would still be blaming him for not helping me to this day.

These reflections were linked to Manu's recent attempts to help a friend come to the UK after a nasty divorce. Because his friend arrived in the UK after the 30 January 2021, he needed to abide by the new points-based immigration law that limited his stay to three months without a right to work. However, Manu promptly found his friend informal work through an acquaintance and even arranged payment into a bank account under a different name. Manu also applied for the EUSS for his friend, despite him not meeting the eligibility criteria, and twisted the truth to say he had already been in the UK but went back to Romania for the birth of his child. His friend desperately paid someone £200 to help speed up his EUSS application, only for the person to then vanish into the night. This pained Manu who was trying to help but found his friend's impatience irritating. He was in the process of trying to find work 'with a contract' for his friend which he imagined would grant him leave to remain, but this was proving tricky without pre-settled status:

> I know him, he is a *good man*. He is a man who has the potential to do something, of course, to contribute to society here, not to be a leech, in short. He's not coming to sit around on benefits, he's not coming to do drugs or other stuff. And this is why my heart is almost breaking, 'cos, I do want to help him, but it's no longer up to me.

The 'ordinary ethics' of helping and being helped

Manu's arrival in the UK and his subsequent attempts to help other Romanians provide a useful illustration of the tension between indifference, refusal and obligation amounting to the 'duty to help'. Rather than existing in stark opposition, the roles of helper and helped become blurred in Manu's narrative, who weaves together his experiences of being favoured and granting favours to set out the moral dimension of these processes. When he first arrived in the UK, Manu recounted how the fact that he did not have any *cunoștințe* made him unsure whether his stint in London would be successful, illustrated by his first week of sleeping rough in a train station. Similar to the 'generations' helped by Amalia and Ovidiu, Manu's initial experiences showcase the importance of connections for securing a foothold in London. His narrative also pushes beyond a purely transactional account of favours, for example when he was taken in by Radu, a friend he had previously helped. While the relationship between the two friends entailed an expectation of reciprocity, the return of Manu's favour came years later, after the friends lost touch, and in a different country altogether. Given this prolonged temporal and spatial element, it would be reductive to paint the two friends as either self-interested and calculated exchange partners, or as wholeheartedly dedicated gift partners. Instead, their encounter combines these two spheres, and can be better unpacked by uncovering the 'ordinary ethics' of helping other Romanians that Manu explained during his interview.

Central to anthropologists' renewed interest in questions of ethics and morality (Mattingly and Throop, 2018), I find the concept of 'ordinary ethics' (Lambek, 2010) useful to bridge notions of ethics and morality with their ethnographic representations in the lives of my interlocutors. In Lambek's (2010) reading, the ordinary character of ethics is derived from its very inseparability from the human

condition and its tacit manifestation. Ethics are the very substance of being human, made and remade everyday, realised in practice rather than existing as an abstract set of norms or knowledge. In a similar vein, Veena Das proposed 'a descent into the ordinary' (Das, 2007, 2012) to better understand ethics, refuting the idea that ethical moments only arrive at extraordinary junctures. She instead proposed that ethics are a key part of the remaking of everyday life, whether in sharing foods, language choices, or other everyday habits and routines. In a recent intervention, Paolo Heywood (2022) argued that in committing to the 'ordinary' kind of ethics, anthropologists should not overlook the kinds of phenomena our interlocutors refer to as ordinary and how they create this sense of ordinariness. It is in this spirit that I use the concept of 'ordinary ethics' here, to understand the moral considerations made by my participants in discussing their daily practices of helping other Romanians.

In Manu's friendship with Radu, the 'ordinary ethics' of helping other Romanians took shape amid a specific set of moral obligations linked to personhood and deservingness – including being a 'settled' migrant, being a good (male) friend, a good guest, and a young man of working age. As a guest, Manu was careful not to inconvenience his host, waking up in the early hours of the morning so that his friend could rest after work. He also abided by his obligation as a young man of working age to eagerly look for work and become economically active as soon as possible. In his role as a friend, Radu did not charge Manu rent while he looked for work. Radu also abided by his obligation as the more 'settled' migrant and showed Manu the ropes of life in London. Yet, as a male friend, Radu did not invest significant time and labour in helping his friend get settled in the UK. I bring in gender here because, as shown in Amalia's example at the beginning of this chapter, a gendered dimension operates within the 'duty to help'. It was generally women who went out of their way to provide some of the painstaking tasks of helping other Romanians, such as attending appointments with new arrivals or providing them with food and a clean house as per Amalia's example. Instead, Radu provided Manu with the tools required to 'help himself', as Manu put it above. This process was however far from frictionless. Manu was at first bitterly disappointed that his friend would not show him the lay of the land, perhaps by accompanying him to Jobcentre appointments or to the bank.

By examining what happens when someone refuses or fails to fulfil expectations of help, we can uncover a different dimension of the 'ordinary ethics' at play in my participants' lives. As Madeleine Reeves explained, one person's attempt at providing a favour can be read as failing and showing the very instrumentality of their actions in the eyes of another, but 'it is the very ambiguity of these categories that is socially generative' (2017:86). In Manu's story, the disappointment with his friend arose out of Radu's unwillingness to act as a hands-on consultant. Echoed in the experiences of Amalia and Ovidiu at the start of this chapter, such expectations of being helped can straddle the realms of bureaucracy, emotional support, and social reproduction. The very same claims were often repeated in other Romanians' stories, whether they were taking others in, feeding them, or accompanying them to Jobcentre or GP appointments. For Manu, his friend's unwillingness to help stopped shy of rupturing their relationship, resulting in unspoken grudges. What salvaged the relationship between the two men

were Manu's own experiences of helping other Romanians, which also shone a light onto another significant dimension of the 'duty to help'. Rather than simply providing help, how one acts when they receive help was also underlined by a set of moral obligations.

Manu's desire to help others originated in a loop of generalised reciprocity, or as he simply puts it: 'help him because you were also helped'. Helping others, as Caroline Humphrey wrote (2012), can turn one into a particular kind of moral person who is caring, ingenious and generous. This generosity however came with various strings attached. Manu expected others to 'help themselves' and to put in work to pursue bureaucratic updates or to find a job. Like Amalia's reflection that she needed to 'let them eat for themselves' at the start of this chapter, there seemed to be a fine line between helping other Romanians and feeling used by them. Yet, too much desire to 'help oneself' could similarly overstep the obligations of being favoured. When Manu's recently arrived friend paid £200 to a bogus consultant for his EUSS application, he overstepped his obligation of being helped. Manu read the proactive gesture of his friend as impatience, rather than an attempt to 'help himself'. Despite this annoyance, Manu persevered to help his friend and we spent about twenty minutes after the interview brainstorming how his friend could go about securing status.

In part, what made Manu persevere was the seeming deservingness of his newly arrived friend, showing how deservingness was a significant dimension of the ordinary ethics behind the 'duty to help'. Manu's friend fit the confines of a deserving recipient – he had been through a difficult personal time, yet he planned to be economically active, would not abuse welfare entitlements or engage in criminal behaviour. It is here that we uncover how 'ordinary ethics' come to mirror state-centred categories and norms of citizenship. In Bridget Anderson's typology (2013), Manu's claims about his friend situate the friend as deserving of help because he does not fall in the category of the Failed Citizen. In Anderson's theorisation, the Failed Citizen is an individual or group imagined as posing a threat to the community of value, such as the benefit scrounger or the criminal. The Failed Citizen fails to fit the model of the 'flexible neoliberal subject, with a portfolio career, making the most of every opportunity, improving skills, and selling his labour to the highest bidder' (Anderson, 2013:7). If we are to apply these notions to Manu's friend, his desire for employment and potential to 'contribute to society', as Manu phrased it, set him apart from the archetype of the Failed Citizen. He is therefore separated from the 'other' Romanians who are imagined as lazy or unwilling 'to help themselves' or otherwise criminal, deviant, and therefore undeserving of help.

This evaluation of deservingness adds further nuance to Manu's initial reluctance to engage with other Romanians upon his arrival in London, whom he had already imagined as *țepari* ('conmen'). While he was initially disappointed by Radu, Manu later used his experiences to explain that one should not simply help every Romanian they meet. To receive his help, those being favoured needed to fit the wider confines of deservingness that at times reflected citizenship norms, while also abiding by their moral obligations of being favoured. Rather than helping everyone by virtue of nationality, Manu's narrative showcased how bestowing favours amounted to more than ethnic or migrant solidarity. Instead

of offering to help everyone and letting himself be 'carried away by his emotions', Manu set out a complicated set of moral norms amounting to his 'duty to help' others – one that cannot be described as neither generalised reciprocity, nor as ethnic solidarity. Instead, like many of my interlocutors, Manu stood by his initial suspicion about other Romanians and continued to regard them with a generalised mistrust. In the final section of this chapter, I examine this mistrust and connect it to the 'ordinary ethics' underpinning the exchange of favours among my participants.

Making sense of mistrust

Given the importance of *cunoştinţe* ('connections') in my participants' lives, a significant paradox emerges about how and why most Romanians seemed to be sceptical and even become hostile towards other Romanians. During my year in London, my interlocutors brought up numerous anecdotes and gossip to substantiate their claims of being cheated or let down by their compatriots. As a caseworker, I became implicated in these events first-hand when beneficiaries needed help to recover their unpaid wages from unscrupulous Romanian bosses, or when I assisted clients to untangle the mess in their benefits applications left by co-nationals masquerading as accountants. However, for the most part, my participants mostly mixed with other Romanians. They lived with other Romanians, worked with them, went to church with them, and built relationships of friendship and kinship with them. Similar to Manu's friendship with Radu, it was often a helping hand from another Romanian that ensured their security and welfare in the UK, whether they happily admitted to it or not. And much like Manu, most Romanians proclaimed that 'I wasn't helped, I helped myself', despite recounting many instances of being helped before, during and in some cases after their time in London.

This paradox is echoed in previous studies of Romanian and other Eastern European migrants, where hostility towards compatriots serves as a running thread across different disciplines and ethnographic regions. In her study of online Romanian communities in Italy, Spain and the UK, Ruxandra Trandafoiu labelled this phenomenon 'diasporic cannibalism' (2013:81) when documenting her participants' infighting and lack of trust in other Romanians, both online and at in-person events. Gloria Macri (2011) similarly attested to how Romanianness became a 'love and hate' notion in online migrant forums of Romanians in Ireland. While participants derived belonging from their shared Christian tradition and their connection to a romanticised ancestral home, they were also quick to point out the selfishness and immorality of their co-nationals. In the words of Moroşanu and Fox's participants, there was 'no smoke without fire' (2013:442), hinting at the proclivity for deception and criminality of their compatriots in London. The resulting stigmatised tropes led Romanians to adopt a wealth of strategies, such as shifting the blame onto the racialised Roma minority or emphasising their individual achievements, to cope with a tainted ethnic identity. As Vicol attested in her doctoral thesis, mistrust emerged among Romanians in London against a 'background of precarity and frustrated mobility' (2019:15). For the Romanians she encountered during her transnational fieldwork in 2014,

shared ethnicity became the instrument of discontent when social security was transferred onto personal connections and help from compatriots rather than the state.

Similar themes emerge in the much more substantive literature on Polish migration in the UK, where expressions like 'Poles are like wolves to one another' (White, 2017:185) are key to narratives about other Poles. For the Polish families studied by Anne White in Bristol, Bath and Trowbridge, a hostility emerged towards 'Polish strangers' abroad (2017:185, see also Ryan, 2010), despite her participants' reliance on ethnic networks to source work, school children, and solve bureaucratic matters. These experiences of mutual assistance were however set aside as White's participants equated the Polish 'national character' with envy or dishonesty, or lamented about a lack of community or solidarity among Poles (White, 2017:185). A separation emerged between specific Polish networks (of shared residence, friendship or kinship) and the generalised population of Polish migrants seen as unhelpful or even dangerous (Ryan *et al.*, 2009). Michał Garapich (2016) similarly attested to his Polish interlocutors in London professing suspicion if not outright hatred of other Poles, despite relying on informal social networks that were ultimately rooted in co-operation and trust. Garapich argued that academics fail to account for their complicity by taking these narratives at face value, which may reproduce the dominant paradigm of migration as a threat to the moral fabric of society and may romanticise the sedentary and unified home community associated with trust and morality. To counter these risks, Garapich coined the 'myth of the Polish conman' (2016:247). This archetype, he argued, serves two functions – setting out the moral obligations of helping one another, and challenging normative views of nationalism, ethnicity and morality by showing how they exist in practice. A similar myth materialised among my interlocutors, resulting in a range of cautionary tales told *by* Romanians about *other* Romanians. Andrei's story contained the perfect combination of friendship, deceit, and bureaucracy needed for such a cautionary tale.

An encounter with the 'conman'

It was my second conversation with Andrei, one of Marcel's most trusted drivers and friends (on whom I focus more on Chapter 6), when he mentioned a personal encounter with the 'conman', to borrow Garapich's (2016) term. A thirty-something, portly man with short black hair, Andrei worked as an Uber driver and agreed to talk to me during his breaks. We spoke on a few occasions via shaky video call as Andrei drove around, smoked cigarettes or waited for clients. When I prompted Andrei about his friendships in London, he recalled an incident that made him reconsider the boundaries of friendship. After returning from Romania after Christmas one year, Andrei was met with the threat of arrest and court summons over unpaid traffic fines. Police officers came to his house and took him to the nearby station, where they told him that his unpaid traffic fines risked losing his driver's licence, not to mention a hefty fine and a court appearance. Andrei was confused by the offence. Besides the fact that he had been away for most of the dates when the fines were incurred, the fines were issued for a car he had never driven. But he knew someone who did.

A fellow Romanian, a young man whom Andrei had helped to come to the UK the year before, had used Andrei's personal details to avoid paying his traffic fines. Once Andrei recognised his friend's car, he explained the fraud to the police. They agreed to let him go provided that he attended a court session to defend his case. Andrei compiled a peculiar folder of evidence combining Facebook pictures of his friend proudly showcasing the car and details of his recent travel to Romania on the dates when the fines were accrued. The Tribunal accepted the proof and erased the fines from Andrei's record. Once he confronted his friend, Andrei was disappointed with the man's convoluted story that he had since sold the car and that the new buyer, another Romanian, must have used Andrei's details. Andrei bitterly concluded that his friend had 'started to learn what happens here, in England' and that regrettably '*others* have taught him badly'. After this brush with the police, Andrei admitted that he had 'let some friendships go' and reconciled to live without many friends in London:

> Here, I don't have many friends. […] This word, "friend", is something very grand for me […] It isn't just anyone who can have the status of a friend, more like acquaintances (*cunoștințe*). […] There's a quote I saw on Facebook […] "We don't have friends, pick up the phone and call all your friends and ask who is able to help you?" […] Your family are your only friends. When it's sunny and the table is full of food, everyone's there. When it's not…

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What makes Andrei's story an effective cautionary tale about the 'myth of the conman' (Garapich, 2016) is the mix of friendship, deceit, and bureaucracy woven into the narrative above. This holds important lessons not only for understanding the figure of the conman, or *țepar* to borrow Manu's earlier phrase, but also for grasping the general role that mistrust played within the 'ordinary ethics' of helping and being helped by other Romanians. Unsurprisingly, bureaucracy played a key role in the story of Andrei's misfortune. It was the unintelligible realm of bureaucracy and the resulting encounter with the police that makes the story threatening in part. The authority of the state hardly ever came into such close contact with my interlocutors, who remained sceptical of authority and avoided it as best they could (which I explore with regard to COVID-19 in Chapter 6). Besides the overall disdain and fear of authority, the encounter with the police had obvious material circumstances for Andrei who would have lost his livelihood as an Uber driver without his driver's licence.

The other chilling part of the story boils down to the ordinary deceit at its core – the broken trust between friends. Andrei recalled the event above to answer my questions about friendship and explain why he did not have many friends in London. The culprit had Andrei's personal details because Andrei had helped him set up his licence to start driving for Uber, and likely shared his own licence details in the process. It is therefore easy to see why Andrei was disappointed and swore off friendships in London. However, Andrei's cautionary tale is more than a story of soured friendship. His friend's transgression doubles as an ungrateful violation of the 'ordinary ethics' governing the exchange of

favours that I have explored in this chapter. Andrei's friend would have ideally used the helping hand he was given to 'help himself', to borrow Manu's terms, and to become economically active. This same obligation applied to the 'few generations' hosted by Amalia and Ovidiu, and to the many Romanians who Manu helped after he was 'given a chance' in London. But rather than honour this obligation, the conman in the story above used the help he was given to engage in fraudulent activity and to exploit other Romanians, particularly Andrei who had helped him come to London. It is therefore not only that the man failed in his role as Andrei's friend, but he also failed to honour the obligation incurred when Andrei helped him start out in the UK. Another significant aspect of the scene above is the elusive figure of *other* Romanian. In his friend's convoluted excuse, it was another Romanian who bought his car and fraudulently used Andrei's details to avoid paying traffic fines. The figure of malevolent *other* Romanians similarly featured in Andrei's disappointed conclusion that 'others' had shown his friend the ropes in the UK and taught him 'badly'.

This brief brush with the 'conman' via Andrei's cautionary tale illustrates how mistrust and the warnings I often received about other Romanians contributed to the very same 'ordinary ethics' that made Amalia and Ovidiu, Manu, and even Andrei continue to help their compatriots. As Garapich (2016) attested for Poles in London, the 'myth of the conman' similarly allowed my participants to test the boundaries of ethnicity, collaboration, and morality. The resulting lack of trust and warnings about other Romanians lays the foundation of a significant mistrust which I explore in greater detail in Chapter 6. In the interactions at the heart of this chapter, the 'conman' helped my interlocutors debate when they must help other Romanians and when it was best to 'let them eat for themselves', to borrow Amalia's phrase. Stories of being taken advantage of underlined the narratives I have presented in this chapter, even if not as clearly as in Andrei's cautionary tale above. For Amalia, it manifested as feeling like people 'were using me' for being 'friendly or whatever', and took material and embodied qualities when lodgers expected her to serve them coffee in the morning or to launder their dirty clothes. In Manu's case, the 'conman' also took an affective notion as he got 'carried away by emotions' and became materially significant when he ended up loaning as much money as the debts that brought him to the UK. Despite these narratives and material realities, neither Amalia, nor Manu stopped helping other Romanians. The affective and material manifestations of the mistrust that seemed to plague relationships between Romanians were but another part of the story they told about the 'ordinary ethics' involved in helping out co-nationals. The cautionary tales along the way simply helped my participants set out not only when to help or turn away other Romanians, but also how those being helped were expected to act.

Conclusion and the 'void' of support

To conclude this chapter, I turn to another conversation from Amalia and Ovidiu's home around the beginning of August 2021. Like many Romanians at that time of year, the family was preparing for a

few weeks in Romania to visit friends and family, solve urgent bureaucratic matters, and enjoy some holiday. While the conversation at the beginning of this chapter happened in a pristine and quiet home, my second visit was much noisier, as the children wandered into the living room and Ovidiu spoke loudly on the phone in the adjoining room. About an hour into our conversation, Amalia pulled Ovidiu into the room during the rare moments when his phone was not ringing. Taking the role of interviewer herself, she asked her husband in a demure tone: 'My love, what can you tell us about this lad you're helping out at the moment?'. Ovidiu paced around the room and spoke with a matter-of-fact tone about a man he had been helping at the time.

The man had lived in the UK for seven years and he worked in an Amazon warehouse when he was asked to relocate to London from Scotland. To his misfortune, his wallet was stolen on his journey down to London. Left with a little bit of cash, he slept a couple of nights in a hostel and then in a local park. Having heard that he could get a 'penalty ticket' in central Underground stations, the man walked miles to central London. He planned to use the penalty ticket to travel to Stansted airport where he would board a flight paid for by his relatives in Romania. Although he made it to the airport, the airline turned him away because he did not have a PCR test, a requirement for one of the transit countries for his flight. The man walked all the way back to central London from the airport.

Despite his initial bravado, Ovidiu grew uneasy as he described the man's shoes caked with blood from the hours of walking. Although the man tried to get help from the police, he was quickly turned away. He then called the Romanian Consulate where the bureaucrats on the phone were similarly reluctant to help. After a few more unsuccessful calls to the Consulate, he finally got hold of a volunteer from a community organisation who contacted another organisation with access to an emergency hostel. In his explanation, Ovidiu did not mention the organisations, he simply referred to the first names of the Romanian people who worked there, some of whom I knew from my job as a caseworker. Owing to this web of *cunoștințe* ('connections'), the man was housed in a hostel and provided with new shoes and clothes. The community organisations even bought him another ticket to Romania the following week. The evening following our conversation, Ovidiu was going to visit the man again and pick him up to have a kebab together. The outing was more than buying the man some food, Ovidiu explained, as he wanted to help the man 'regain his faith in humanity'. Such outings were not a one-off occasion, Ovidiu clarified. Especially during the pandemic, he found a 'void' of support around people in their moments of greatest need:

> There are many, many [people] in this situation. You know, what I saw, not only during the pandemic, because you cannot say it is a pandemic anymore, but this is [still] the situation. People are alone. It's very difficult to find people you can rely on. This lad is the same, he said to me: "In seven years, you couldn't even count how many people I helped with their *acte*, with their settlement, with a bank card, with I don't know what, and look, when I was in need: "Sorry, I'm on holiday. Sorry, I'm away…"" You know? I mean, it's not going the extra mile, is it? I pity a stranger, never mind someone I actually know…

Ovidiu's story provides a good summary of the argument I have set forth in this chapter. He used the man's example to show how misfortune becomes aggravated by a failure of other Romanians in their 'duty to help'. There might be some truth to the fact that if the man had some *cunoştinţe* in London, he might not have ended up sleeping in a park or walking back from Stansted airport. Without undermining the toils of his misfortune, I however argue that the 'void' to which Ovidiu points showcases the 'ordinary ethics' behind the 'duty to help', rather than setting out a clear causality for the man's troubles.

Reminding us of the *buletin* at the start of this chapter, bureaucracy played an important role in the man's misfortune as his wallet, together with ID and bank cards, were stolen. Other bureaucratic structures feature in the story, such as the penalty ticket or the PCR test, and institutions, like the police or the Consulate, emerge as impassive and unyielding in the face of a man without *cunoştinţe*. Direct, domestic work and care illustrated by Amalia's bed under the stairs was similarly important to the story above. Rather than made invisible in a well-crafted story of independence and success (like most of the interviews I conducted), its absence was strongly felt as the man struggled to find safe places to sleep and eventually resorted to sleeping rough. Ovidiu's narrative therefore featured the distinct practices amounting to the 'duty to help', albeit all intertwined in order to describe his shock at the failure of other Romanians to help a co-national down on his luck. This failure of the 'duty to help' similarly reflects my point linking 'ordinary ethics' and deservingness in this chapter. Like Manu's newly-arrived friend, the unfortunate man in the story was made into a worthwhile recipient of help. His deservingness was not only connected to his misfortunes, but it was derived from his ability to 'eat for himself', to borrow Amalia's turn of phrase. The man had been arduously working in the UK for years, so his brush with homelessness was absolved of any criminality or moral failure that may be otherwise connected to rough sleeping. Moreover, the man in Ovidiu's story had also helped other Romanians himself, alluding to the generalised reciprocity encompassed by the 'duty to help', which Manu plainly summarised as 'help him because you were also helped' earlier in this chapter. Finally, Ovidiu's lamentation about the difficulty to 'find people to rely on' echoed the general mistrust and cautionary tales of interacting with other Romanians. The fickleness of these imagined Romanians, some of whom had been previously helped by the man in question, was scrutinised in Ovidiu's tale, reminding of Andrei's cautionary warnings about a lack of true friendship in London.

Besides illustrating the arguments in this chapter, Ovidiu's touching narrative about a 'void' of support also brings up new dimensions of the exchange of favours involved in the process of helping other Romanians. The missing link that Ovidiu inadvertently emphasises in his narrative is the role of institutional or state support. Upon reading about the man's misfortune, the reader would not be amiss in asking why the police failed to assist the man who was simply a victim of crime. Why did the bureaucrats of the Romanian Consulate turn the man away in his hour of need? And why did Ovidiu's cautionary tale stop shy of condemning these institutions? My intention here is not to discredit Ovidiu or his concerns about the dangerous outcomes of this 'void' of support. After all, he makes a compelling

case where appealing to *cunoştinţe* might have saved the man a lot of trouble. Nor is my intended outcome to portray Ovidiu as unaware of his rights or politically demotivated, since his support of the man was highly political in itself. Instead, I turn to the other *cunoştinţe* that permeate his account above – the Romanian men and women he listed by first name, the network that got activated when the unfortunate man got hold of a community organisation volunteer at the Romanian Consulate. It is this web of community organisations that I turn to in the next chapter. By focusing on my experiences of volunteering at a Romanian-run foodbank, I set out to show how the 'duty to help' was formalised within community organisations, where webs of *cunoştinţe* and favours continued to underscore the provision of help. It was this different realm of the 'duty to help' that made the difference when some Romanians fell through the gaps of government pandemic support.

Chapter 5: The political affordances of favours: Exploring encounters with the state at a Romanian-run foodbank

In September 2021, the foodbank where I regularly volunteered hosted a public health event about 'general health and well-being'. Mioara, the forty-something Romanian woman who ran the foodbank, asked for my help with live translation. Since the panellists did not speak Romanian and the foodbank could not afford a translator, I agreed to help. The colourful event posted read 'How are YOU doing?' and encouraged Romanians to 'join in a conversation about health during the pandemic, wellbeing, and financial challenges'. The speakers included a senior public health official working for the local authority, a GP working in the borough, and a welfare adviser from the local branch of a large national charity.

I arrived an hour earlier to help Mioara set up. We laid out twenty blue plastic chairs in the room next to the foodbank, which housed a public-funded nursery during the day. The brick walls covered in thick layers of grey paint shone bright under the neon lights, giving the room a cold, clinical look. We set up comfortable chairs and two folding tables for the speakers at the front, carefully covering them with mismatched tablecloths before adding a vase of fresh flowers. A table full of sweet treats, tea, and coffee awaited at the back of the room. Foodbank volunteers and beneficiaries soon started arriving. During their collection service earlier that day, the staff had encouraged beneficiaries to attend the event in exchange for an extra food parcel. Mioara proclaimed that '*we* as Romanians' must encourage our co-nationals to attend such events. Rather than speaking about loftier goals like awareness raising, she was determined to show the local council that the Romanian community existed and needed their support. Mioara often spoke pragmatically about needing to engage the council, describing it as a reciprocal relationship of helping one another where necessary. An event organised in partnership with the local council was an important feat for the small foodbank that lacked funding and a permanent space. The council, in turn, valued the help of such small community organisations to engage the otherwise reluctant Romanian resident population and to meet their outreach targets without going to the trouble of finding a venue or attendees.

On that damp autumn evening, Mioara's efforts had not been in vain. About a dozen beneficiaries were dotted around the room, while some volunteers and their spouses sat tentatively at the back. Uncharacteristically timid, Mioara welcomed everyone and introduced the speakers sat behind the folding tables. The public health official, a stern-looking woman in her fifties, spoke at length about COVID-19, how to book an appointment for vaccination, and the importance of the vaccine for protecting one another. She also sought to 'debunk' any claims that the vaccine was not sufficiently tested or that it had worrying side effects such as affecting one's fertility. Some of the foodbank beneficiaries in the audience exchanged smirks and sceptical looks, since they often debated these topics while waiting outside the foodbank.

The following speaker, a GP at a local surgery, dwelled on other health concerns besides COVID-19, including alcoholism and smoking. This was key to the event since most attendees were likely tired of the pandemic and would have been even less willing to attend had the event solely focused on COVID-19. The GP focused instead on what individuals could do to fight these more common 'problems' and mentioned treatment programmes onto which they could be registered by their doctors. Finally, the last speaker briefly explained what welfare packages could support those experiencing financial difficulties because of Covid, without mentioning that many benefits like Universal Credit were at the time being stripped away for EU nationals with limited leave to remain, a situation that applied to many attendees.[35]

What followed next was a wave of questions-turned-confessions from the foodbank regulars in the room. A woman in her fifties spoke at length about her struggle to contact her GP practice over the phone, which led her to be 'blacklisted' after attempting to go to the clinic in person during the pandemic. Left without any primary care, her leg lay swollen and painful at her side. Another beneficiary jokingly opened up about his struggle with alcoholism, despite being enrolled in various programmes by his GP. Another beneficiary spoke about the challenges of finding work after losing his job during the pandemic. Towards the end of the session, a young single mother sobbed uncontrollably when trying to explain her struggle to find suitable accommodation for her and her children. Her young children were comforted by a volunteer outside when she took to the floor to explain she could not access emergency housing and risked being evicted from the house where she sublet a room informally. I knew the case of the woman well, as did every other Romanian charity worker in the room. She had moved from charity to charity in search of help, but to no avail as she did not fit the council's criteria – she had not been made homeless *yet*.

It came close to the end of the session and none of the questions were answered. The public health official politely explained that they could not discuss individual problems with a GP surgery in a public forum, and encouraged the woman with the infected leg to drop off her contact details after the session. The man struggling with alcoholism was also encouraged to contact their GP who could prescribe them a better treatment. As to the man who lost his job and the young single mom, they were encouraged to call the welfare adviser's charity and make an appointment with a caseworker. I struggled to remain composed while translating these answers. I tried my best to remain polite so as not to harm Mioara's relationship with the speakers and jeopardise any prospective funding for the foodbank. Ovidiu, whose story I explored in the previous chapter, later commented on my politeness, jokingly praising me for behaving in an 'English' way: 'You could tell me that I'm going to die tomorrow and I would end up thanking you.'

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[35] Known as the 'Frățilă case', the Supreme Court handed down judgement in 2021 attesting that EU citizens could not rely upon their 'pre-settled status' (limited leave to remain) to claim means-tested benefits including Universal Credit (The Supreme Court, 2021).

As I relayed the panellists' advice, I felt an emptiness in the pit of my stomach. I knew very well that none of the beneficiaries were likely to solve their concerns by following the bureaucratic steps set out by the speakers. Many of them had in fact been failed by these very same bureaucratic structures. For the woman with an infected leg, she had struggled to access care because she had difficulties communicating her problem in English over the phone and in emails. During my volunteering the previous week, I had taken a couple of hours to help her correct a mistake on her benefits application by calling the helpline and translating for her. Encouraging her to send an email would certainly not improve the situation. The man battling alcoholism and smoking was also unemployed and went through bouts of homelessness, which foodbank volunteers signalled when they started giving him more canned meals and sandwiches over fresh ingredients that would require cooking. It seemed unlikely that a different medication could help him. As to the young mother, being assigned a new caseworker who did not speak Romanian would be unlikely to help her remove herself from the limbo she was currently in, as she struggled to find work and accrued debt to cover her rent arrears, risking homeless at any moment. The same applied to the other beneficiaries who either skipped from charity to charity in hope of support, fell off the radar, and eventually returned to the foodbank to ask for help with minor bureaucratic tasks that seemed to be nothing but a drop in the ocean.

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The public health event above and the unsettled feeling left in its wake were not uncommon at the Romanian-run foodbank where I volunteered. My days at the foodbank were often spent listening to beneficiaries' concerns similar to those above, mapping out how and when they had come into contact (and conflict) with various British state departments and services. The bureaucratic structures to which I was accustomed in my job as a caseworker, such as emails, call reference numbers, and referral forms, were notably missing. I also lacked the case notes and bureaucratic resources needed to demystify stories of homelessness and destitution, a lack amplified by the uncertain recollections of the foodbank users. One certainty was their presence at the foodbank, week in and out. Like the sobbing young mother in the episode above, most beneficiaries moved from charity to charity in search of help. While other charities utilised policies to sever relationships with so-called 'difficult clients', the foodbank seemed to collect them. Many of the clients I dealt with at my job eventually appeared at the foodbank, to collect food and seek help with their *acte* ('papers'). During my time at the foodbank, I found this situation puzzling. Why did this small, precariously funded foodbank seem to provide the most continuous help to Romanians in need? How come the informal space of a foodbank set up at the beginning of the pandemic proved so effective at drawing in and helping so many Romanians? By reckoning with these questions, in this chapter I focus on yet another dimension of the 'duty to help' and link it to encounters with bureaucracy and the British state. Using ethnography of this Romanian-run foodbank, I set out to show how the favours behind the 'duty to help' became politicised and held the potential for resistance.

The event above fittingly showcases how the foodbank became the arena in which many Romanians, who otherwise fell through the gaps of state support, came to face the British state. The speakers at the event neatly exemplified a range of state institutions and bureaucratic structures that my participants ran up against in their daily lives. The public health official served as a reminder of the apparently never-ending pandemic governance. The GP represented the most common point of contact with the state for most of my interlocutors, second only to teachers and school officials for those who had children. Positioned outside the state's grasp, the charity worker represented the many bureaucratic practices outside the reach of my interlocutors, such as sending emails and making online appointments. Given the prominence of these institutions and bureaucratic practices, it becomes clearer why none of the speakers at the event could answer the tirade of questions launched by the attendees. It would be unlikely that the very same bureaucratic structures that let some Romanians fall through the cracks of state support would give them a leg up to make it back out.

Another significant relationship with the state illustrated in the episode above is that of the foodbank itself as a self-appointed representative of Romanians. The foodbank engaged in a reciprocal exchange of favours with the speakers and the local authority who co-organised the event. In Mioara's explanation, the event would help 'show them we are here', communicating the needs of an imagined Romanian community to the local authority in hopes of securing future funding. The council would in turn be able to claim to have conducted an 'outreach' event with a reluctant, yet significant, resident population. The reciprocal thinking outlined by Mioara similarly occurred in relationship with the beneficiaries, who were promised an extra bag of food for their attendance. Overall, this strategic use of reciprocity helped the foodbank support some of the most vulnerable Romanians who crossed their doorstep, as I show in this chapter.

To explore how this happened, I draw on participant observation from my weekly volunteering over five months after COVID-19 restrictions lifted and after I had my first dose of the vaccine. Every Tuesday and Thursday, the foodbank provided a couple of bags of foodstuff donated by a larger charity that collected surplus supermarket food in London, local businesses and a few well-meaning individuals. The foodbank's service users combined young Romanian mothers pushing prams with homeless men with callused hands, elderly people who did not qualify for a state pension, and local residents, such as hijab-wearing mothers and young schoolchildren otherwise removed from and often treated with scepticism by the Romanian population. Twice a week, the foodbank brought together a handful of volunteers who packed a couple of bags of food for each beneficiary, listened to their troubles, and worked hard to leave the rented space clean and tidy.

I mostly focus on the narratives of foodbank staff and volunteers rather than those of beneficiaries, whom I often helped with casework which pushed our relationships beyond the realm of research interactions (see Methods section in Introduction). Rather than existing separately from the actions of Camelia or Amalia from previous chapters, the foodbank operated as an extension of the 'duty to help' that many of the Romanians I worked with felt towards their co-nationals. Similar to how

it guided practices of 'doing family' (Chapter 3) and the exchange of favours with other Romanians (Chapter 4), the need to help other Romanians and its reliance on favours continued in this charitable space as Romanian staff and volunteers attempted to help their compatriots. Unlike other organisations, foodbank staff did not have any formal training in service provision, nor did the material space and practices of the foodbank follow clear bureaucratic standards. Instead, I show how the foodbank strategically combined bureaucracy with the culturally intimate language of favours to formalise the 'duty to help' and to support Romanians in need. When the state grew uncaring towards Romanians during the pandemic, it was the favours and reciprocal practices of the foodbank that shouldered the burden of care and worked to prevent hunger and destitution. I first turn to Mioara's story of setting up the foodbank to show how it worked and how it incorporated bureaucracy in its efforts to secure funding and legitimacy in the eyes of the British state.

De la om la om ('From person to person')

Mioara was one of the many first names followed by acronyms and English words (such as 'foodbank', 'hub,' or 'community') that other Romanians working in community organisations and charities casually mentioned in conversation. These names were often key to their explanations of an unfortunate case, like the names listed by Ovidiu in the story of the man who walked from Stansted in the previous chapter. A well-known figure in the Romanian community, Mioara arrived in the UK nearly twenty years ago as a student on a temporary agricultural visa to work on a strawberry farm. She spoke proudly of her speedy picking honed during her childhood in the Romanian countryside, which attracted the envy of other farm workers. With dreams of higher education, Mioara decided to stay in the UK. She quickly changed her ambitions after struggling to obtain a visa, which she eventually secured with the help of a Bulgarian solicitor: 'It was the Bulgarians who helped me, not at all the Romanians. The Romanians told me to wait for them to get a visa, and *then* they'd help me.'

Despite the initial disappointment with her co-nationals, Mioara's dedication to helping other Romanians started all those years ago, long before she opened the foodbank. Most of the established volunteers reminisced how Mioara helped them get their *acte* when they first arrived in the UK. After keeping in touch with the solicitor who helped her obtain her visa, Mioara started working in his office as a bureaucratic consultant for Romanians for nearly ten years, doing everything from interpreting to book-keeping. She juggled as many as six jobs at one point, also working in cleaning or as a babysitter. She also tried her hand at running a Romanian disco in Central London before deciding to start a social enterprise meant to 'inform' other Romanians. Being 'informed' ran through my conversations with Romanians working or volunteering in community organisations. They often decried their co-nationals' unwillingness to 'inform themselves' (*să se informeze*), whether about securing their immigration status or registering for self-employment. In Mioara's eyes, one of the main ills that the foodbank addressed was not precarious work, unaffordable housing, or unemployment, but this unwillingness to 'inform

oneself' in the Romanian community. In practice, the services provided by the foodbank naturally combined the alleged need to help 'inform' other Romanians with the material realities of unemployment or homelessness.

In 2018, Mioara and a few other Romanian women first discussed starting a community organisation that morphed into the foodbank where I volunteered during my fieldwork. Building on their own experiences in the UK, the women witnessed the growing need for a helping hand to other Romanians in the area. The first step was to bring people together, which Mioara summarised using the English word 'meeting':

> And that's when we wrote the *constitution*, and we started, we worked with the *constitution*. And we started everything, slowly, slowly. And we knocked on doors at the council. […] To be able to go to the council, we needed proof. Black on white. To tell them that, truly, these are our Romanians' needs. Because we, when we made the *'minute'*, we thought about it and discussed how we could find out [what] people's needs [are], you know? And we made a *questionnaire*. We thought about a few questions and started asking people. And we went to them [the council] with this and told them that this is what people need and that we have so many *questionnaires*, and so on…

Since Mioara helped with translation at the local council, she started asking around about how to start her social enterprise. Mioara interspersed the first names of people working at the council with various English words like 'policy' and 'training' to account for the bureaucratic advice she was given. Her community organisation idea soon took off, about six months after the initial meeting. The organisation started out as a soup kitchen, which met Mioara's initial plans:

> I thought of a round table. Where you can be simple, you don't wear clothes to show who you are, you know? Just to be 'friendly', you know? To speak openly, person to person (*de la om la om*), and for the person to open up to you. And with us being Romanian, I thought this would be the way we can help as many people as possible.

The community kitchen opened in a small back-alley room, from which they offered a home-cooked meal to Romanians in need. They also periodically brought in community organisations for outreach and information sessions. In their first year, Mioara estimated that they helped over 200 people. When the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, the organisation needed to change its model. In the space of a month, Mioara successfully laid the groundwork for a foodbank with a collection and delivery service for those self-isolating. Unlike similar services,[36] the foodbank did not impose means-tested conditions, ask for vouchers, or operate strict eligibility criteria. Mioara explained that she lobbied hard for this lack of eligibility criteria from the beginning of the service. She found it embarrassing to turn

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[36] At the time, foodbanks ran by the Trussell Trust, a charity running a nationwide network of foodbanks, allowed up to six vouchers to collect 'emergency food' within a six month period. To obtain vouchers, service users needed to be referred by 'different frontline professionals' such as doctors, social workers, or charity workers (The Trussell Trust, 2024).

people away because they lived in the wrong borough and worked to loosen such bureaucratic requirements. Mioara assumed that Romanians would not abuse the service and waived the need for beneficiaries to show proof of low income or benefits, or to be referred by another charity or local authority. New beneficiaries could wander in off the street, and were simply asked to fill in a paper form disclosing basic details such as address and contact details, before joining the line to receive a bag or two of donated foodstuff. This lack of eligibility made the foodbank grow in popularity, with the number of beneficiaries fluctuating between forty to seventy people a day, especially when similar services shut down locally.

Mioara's narrative about setting up the foodbank illustrates how the community organisation sought to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the state through bureaucracy. Rather than a Graeberian celebration of rules for their own sake (Graeber, 2015), their efforts to pursue bureaucratic infrastructure were strategic, aimed at tempering the 'duty to help' and formalising it into charitable aims that could attract funding and support from the local authorities. Both at its origins and in its daily running, the foodbank sought to gain legitimacy through bureaucratic ideas and practices. In her narrative above, Mioara listed a range of bureaucratic structures, borrowing English words such as 'meeting' or 'minute', and using clumsy Romanian translations of terms like 'constitution' or 'questionnaire'. In her narrative above, the first steps of setting up the community organisation were writing a constitution, holding a meeting, and taking minutes. Armed with these bureaucratic records, Mioara sought help directly from the local authority, using the well-worn language of favours. She and her partners were painstakingly 'knocking on doors at the council' until they convinced someone to look their way. When they finally obtained some advice, it took a bureaucratic form once more, which Mioara summarised using the English terms of 'policy' or 'training'.

This fight for bureaucratic legitimacy was an uphill battle that continued during my volunteering. Service users were asked to sign in on a printout of a busy spreadsheet, and Mioara later ticked off their names using an online platform aimed at documenting the foodbank's impact. During the day, Mioara often attended a range of online trainings provided by the council or by larger charities on how to create policies and train volunteers. The sound of Zoom meetings filled the room while Mioara simultaneously attended to everyday problems with volunteers or staff members. Established volunteers were also selected for training aimed to improve the foodbank's bureaucratic standing. In the summer of 2021, I helped Amalia with her coursework for an online course in information, advice, and guidance. While Amalia valued the opportunity to attend the course, she struggled to write her assignments and balance her childcare, employment, and volunteering. She confided in me that she only enrolled on the course at Mioara's request so that the foodbank could attest that some of the volunteers were trained in service provision and advice.

While Mioara and her team highlighted bureaucratic structures and practices in both the founding of the foodbank and some of its daily practices, bureaucracy was simultaneously resisted in the actual running of the foodbank. In practice, the staff and volunteers combined bureaucracy with the

reciprocal language and practices of favours to which many Romanians were accustomed. Mioara outlined this commitment in her reflection above about starting the soup kitchen premised on the figure of an approachable, personable Romanian. Imagined as the *cunoştinţă* ('connection') *par excellence*, Mioara described this figure as someone who does not 'wear clothes to show who you are' and speaks to people in an informal and relatable way (*de la om la om*) over hot home-cooked food. This service provision model was in turn cemented by Mioara's commitment to evade eligibility criteria for the foodbank, such as providing bureaucratic evidence of limited means, benefits or local residence. Rather than ask for vouchers, referrals, or proof of benefits, the foodbank permitted anyone off the street to use the services and collect some food. This commitment to sidestep such bureaucratic structures often employed in the third sector showcased how the foodbank aimed to at times resist bureaucracy where it interfered with the culturally intimate service they sought to provide.

While I reviewed the limitations and affordances of bureaucracy at the beginning of this thesis (see Introduction), making the distinction between bureaucracy and adhocracy proves useful to unpack Mioara's narrative about the origins of the foodbank. In her work with Georgian internally displaced people, Elizabeth Dunn theorised how humanitarian interventions were governed by *adhocracy*, rather than rationalised bureaucracy:

> Although humanitarian actors claim to govern by applying rationalizing techniques of seeing, counting, and managing, in fact humanitarian aid is a process based as much on guesswork, rules of thumb, and ''satisficing'' as it is on rational planning. This, I argue, transforms bureaucracy into what I call adhocracy, a form of power that creates chaos and vulnerability as much as it creates order. (2012:2)

She defined adhocracy as 'a system that used rough-and-ready ways of knowing to quickly arrive at improvised solutions' which is not a deviation, but a key part of the humanitarian system that renders suffering visible and seeks to alleviate it (Dunn, 2012:15). To describe this process of alleviation, Dunn outlined three modalities of care: affective – where humanitarianism emerges as an ethical configuration; bureaucratic – where suffering is turned into a logistical problem to be rationalised in a Weberian way; and material – where bureaucratic infrastructures are turned into material goods such as food, medicine or safe spaces. For my purposes here, I find the tensions between bureaucracy and adhocracy useful to unpack Mioara's narrative about setting up the soup kitchen that eventually became the foodbank. The origins of the foodbank strategically utilised perceptions about rationalised bureaucracy and the realities of humanitarian adhocracy. Although bureaucratic practices and structures were used to motivate the founding of the foodbank, Mioara's narrative combined the ethical, bureaucratic, and material modalities of care amounting to adhocracy. The ethical obligations to help co-nationals 'inform themselves' soon morphed into bureaucratic records that rationalised and quantified their needs in order to give shape to the material space and practices of the soup kitchen. Yet, while Dunn identified a distinction between claims of rationalising and rationalised bureaucracy and adhocracy in her ethnography, Mioara's narrative combined bureaucracy and adhocracy in an attempt

to provide culturally intimate practices of support to Romanians in need. This cultural intimacy behind the foodbank lends its practices closer to what recent scholars have deemed 'vernacular humanitarianism'.

The recent interest in 'vernacular humanitarianism' or 'humanitarianism from below' (Brković, 2017a, 2023) provides a useful framework to analyse the efforts of the foodbank. Rather than appealing to a broad 'we' of humanity, the 'we' in vernacular humanitarianism is 'a more situated, next-door-neighbour-position of those who can be affected by the same burdens, structural issues and historically shaped contingencies' (Brković, 2023:2). Mioara's commitment to 'our Romanians' echoed this situated form of humanitarianism because it was born out of her own experiences as a labour migrant accustomed to the challenges of legitimising status and finding work. Beyond Mioara's own predicaments, 'vernacular humanitarianism' best captures the structure and daily activities of the foodbank when compared to other potential concepts in the anthropological literature on humanitarianism. This novel concept stands somewhat separate from the studies of 'transnational humanitarianism' (Ticktin, 2014) and its well-explored ills in the literature as a vertical form of action, reliant on hierarchical structures and pre-selected norms of vulnerability which reproduce state-centred norms and practices (Barnett, 2011; Fassin, 2012a; Malkki, 2015). These concerns were amplified in the critique of aid efforts and interventions during the 'migration crisis' (Sandri, 2018; Stierl, 2018; Cabot, 2019; Sutter, 2020; Hernández-Carretero, 2023). The actions of the foodbank seldom fit within this register. The norms of vulnerability underpinning deservingness at the foodbank emerge according to value norms already at play among other Romanians, only some of which echo state-centred or integration categories. Vernacular humanitarianism also stands apart from the horizontal practices of solidarity, which have been the focus of numerous researchers who question the progressive character of grassroot solidarity, such as volunteer humanitarianism which can at times pose as an antidote to neoliberalism while remaining part and parcel of it (Rozakou, 2016; Cabot, 2019). While the actions of the foodbank were born out of solidarity, they were not overtly politically-motivated against integration or the aims of the 'host' state as many other solidarity efforts are in the field of migration humanitarianism. Instead, the foodbank's actions at times reproduced norms of integration, as illustrated in Mioara's emphasis on needing to help Romanians 'inform themselves' over a more radical commitment to ending homelessness or poverty in the community.

Beyond providing adequate categorisation, the lens of 'vernacular humanitarianism' can also help 'provincialize' the humanitarian tradition by decentring the dominant discourse to instead create and enact alternatives (Weiss, 2015:278). It can shed light onto 'situated, peripheral and sometimes even decolonising visions and practices of 'the humanity' understood as a morally imbued framework for imagining and recognising broadly shared experiences' (Brković, 2023:2). Paying attention to these small-scale humanitarianisms can help illuminate peripheral perspectives on the moral frameworks at play in recognising a shared humanity, in turn emphasising the subjectivities rather than the vulnerability of those being helped. Within the space of the foodbank, 'vernacular humanitarianism'

allows me to explore different forms of help and reciprocity and uncover the spaces of resistance they afford. This is what I turn to next, exploring a typical day at the foodbank and unpacking how favours and reciprocity underscored service provision.

An extension of the 'duty to help'

On a sunny morning in May 2021, I started the day with a rapid Covid test after baby Magdalena ran a fever the night before. The test came back negative so I jumped on my bicycle and hurried to the foodbank. My days at the foodbank sped past to the dizzying rhythms of cleaning, packing up food, and talking to beneficiaries. I often arrived in the morning before ten and left close to five or six in the evening. The foodbank was located in a long, dark room in a small building which resembled a large garage. I parked my bike in the big concrete yard and hurried inside. When I stepped inside the foodbank, the atmosphere was rushed and the floor was unorganised. A service user, Violeta, came to volunteer but seemed to be mostly getting in the way. She sported two pigtails pulling her thinning hair tightly and grinned widely to show her missing teeth. She promptly asked me if I had 'kids or a man', only to be reprimanded by the other volunteers seconds later. Violeta chatted loudly and abundantly throughout the day, to the annoyance of the other volunteers who repeatedly scolded her. She periodically sneaked out of the building to smoke with a beneficiary, reminding me of high school truants. Allowing Violeta to be in this space, despite her failure to clean or help, seemed to be somewhat of a tacit agreement between the volunteers.

The staff and volunteers at the foodbank changed every week, but a few remained constant. Mioara rushed around clutching a pair of car keys and speaking rapidly on the phone. Her scrutinising eyes oversaw the running of the place from behind a worn-out desk piled high with stacks of paper, post-its, and loose PPE items. Mioara would often come and go, collecting deliveries from local businesses or delivering food parcels to disabled or shielding beneficiaries. Her younger sister, Roxana, managed the practical running of the foodbank, joking loudly with both beneficiaries and volunteers throughout the day. Amalia, whose story I unpacked in the previous chapter, and a couple of other Romanian women in their forties also joined on their days off work. Volunteers also included service users who were allotted different tasks and levels of responsibility. Two elderly volunteers stood out the most. *Doamna* Doina ('Mrs.'), a kind woman in her late fifties who struggled with her mental health and alcoholism but helped put together food parcels. *Domnul* Viorel ('Mr.'), an elderly man who did not qualify for a state pension and was rumoured to have cancer, volunteered outside as he was reluctant to come inside 'with the ladies'. He instead busied himself with stacking food crates and flattening cardboard boxes in the concrete yard. It was common for service users like Violeta to join the foodbank for a day of volunteering, and Roxana kept a close watch on them and gave them small tasks throughout the day.

Around midday, when the van with donations from supermarkets arrived, all volunteers lined up under Roxana's careful eye and passed the heavy crates from hand to hand until they covered the floor of the cramped space (see Figure 8). The room was filled with shouts of '*vegetale!*' or '*pâine!*' as the crates were categorised. After this speedy sorting, Roxana joked with the delivery driver, a white-haired retired man, who sometimes charmed the women by bringing them an armful of flowers donated by large supermarkets. Most donations came from a charity that collected surplus supermarket food in London and distributed it to local foodbanks. Some donations came from local businesses such as bakeries on the nearby high street or from the council-run donation points. It was unusual for individuals to donate food directly to the foodbank. Once the donations were sorted, the volunteers hurried to select foodstuff from the plastic crates for the two bags of food they received in exchange of a day's work. The women often selected meats, fresh produce, and chocolates or cakes. After this careful selection, the volunteers started packing food parcels for the beneficiaries who lined up in the yard.

Figure 8: Sorting donations at the foodbank.

I generally spent my afternoons outside, chatting to beneficiaries and asking them questions from the various surveys the foodbank produced about COVID-19 or their services. At Mioara's request, I also helped the beneficiaries with a range of bureaucratic tasks, from contacting the council to updating their benefits or immigration applications. Mioara and Roxana attempted to make appointments for those who required help with such bureaucratic matters, but their efforts were often in vain. Romanians in need of bureaucratic help instead showed up around mid-morning and waited outside the building, for hours on end, until most of the food parcels were distributed and someone would be free to help them with their query. This work stood in stark contrast to my usual casework.

Most of my advising happened at the same foldaway plastic desk where I greeted foodbank beneficiaries and asked them to sign in. The desk sat under a large navy tent that volunteers stored away at the end of the day. Whenever I was asked to help a beneficiary contact a government department, and wait on hold for what felt like hours, Roxana shooed other beneficiaries away or reprimanded them for being too loud. In place of the complex case notes I was accustomed to in my job, I left unintelligible scribblings on a paper form for Mioara who would later try to refer the beneficiary for further advice.

As the number of beneficiaries dwindled, I joined the team of volunteers back inside where we cleaned and made food parcels for late comers. Roxana's teenage daughter joined us and took a seat in the corner of the room, eating the sandwich her mother had set aside and scrolling intently on her smartphone. Volunteers' children often waited at the foodbank after school while we finished cleaning up. That was how I had first met Mioara's daughter and how I grew to know Amalia's daughter before I ever set foot in their home. Once the cleaning was done, Roxana and Mioara counted the beneficiaries who came during the day, exchanging anecdotes and bidding goodbye to the volunteers. When Mioara found out that the volunteers had banned a service user from using the toilet after the man had made a mess that day, she asked part-outraged, part-amused: 'So what did you do, did you let him soil himself?'.

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At its heart, favours underpinned the staffing and daily running of the foodbank. Kinship and reciprocity were central to the running of the service, with sisters Mioara and Roxana working hard to keep the organisation afloat, despite neither of them having training or experience working in the third sector. While running the foodbank was Mioara's full-time job, Roxana worked as a manager in the cleaning team of a large hotel. She agreed to work at the foodbank to help Mioara, while the few hours of paid work at the foodbank also supplemented her income and meant a couple of bags of foodstuff for her and her daughter. Favours also permeated volunteer appointments at the foodbank. Amalia, whose story we encountered in the previous chapter, volunteered at the foodbank out of a commitment to helping Mioara who had assisted her and Ovidiu with their *acte* when they arrived in London a decade ago. Some of the other women who volunteered at the foodbank similarly attested to wanting to help Mioara and commended her generous spirit, or recounted how they were once helped by the foodbank and wished to return the favour. I noticed the same desire for reciprocity when the Boians and I fell ill with COVID-19 in the summer of 2021 and Mioara promptly delivered two crates of food to our doorstep. Although Marcel was usually sceptical of the foodbank and its finances, he also sheepishly professed wanting to help out after receiving the food delivery.

This sense of reciprocity was also evident in how the foodbank recruited volunteers from its service users and how it rewarded their labour. Service users would volunteer at the foodbank irregularly, since some of them went through short bouts of employment, often arranged by the *cunoștințe* ('connections') of someone working at the foodbank. Whenever she manned the plastic desk

where beneficiaries signed in, Roxana jovially invited them to volunteer, explaining the job in a reciprocal 'you help us, we help you' way. Mioara recounted a similar logic when I asked why so many volunteers were ex-service users:

> I think people want to give something back when they receive something. They *feel*. I think everybody would be like this. For me, at least, I always feel indebted if someone helps me, I want to give something back, I've always been like this. And I think you touch people by doing this thing [the foodbank].

This baked-in reciprocity was also evident in how volunteers were rewarded at the foodbank. Rather than a selfless act of donating their time and labour, the women were encouraged to rummage through the crates of food received in the midday delivery and set aside whatever took their fancy, as I briefly outlined above. This practice often made me feel uneasy and I hesitated to set aside food, only to find out that Roxana dutifully prepared a bag of goods for me anyway, as she also did for *Domnul* Viorel who keenly upheld his watch of the courtyard. In Mioara and Roxana's explanations, the least they could do was provide this food in exchange for the unpaid labour of the volunteers. These aspects of the running of the foodbank emphasise its 'vernacular humanitarianism' as the provision of help did not simply reflect universal humanitarian values, but it hinged on more locally-situated and culturally intimate values. The women and few men who volunteered at the foodbank did so based on their own experiences of mobility, rather than only out of a conviction about the injustices of food poverty, for example. Moreover, the same web of favours amounting to the 'duty to help' were key to how and why Romanians volunteered at the foodbank. Some volunteers joined the foodbank because it represented another *cunoștință* (connection) in the exchange of favours, after being helped themselves by Mioara or by the foodbank. The way in which volunteers were rewarded for their labour – by having first pick of the food donations and taking two bags home – similarly engaged more culturally familiar and vernacular ideas of humanitarianism since it acknowledged the importance of reciprocity over the idea of selflessly giving up one's time and energy. These narratives and practices of reciprocity remind us of Manu's commitment in the previous chapter to 'help because you were also helped'. However, like Manu, the volunteering at the foodbank also followed a contested set of 'ordinary ethics' in their service provision (see Chapter 4).

Beyond reciprocity and the exchange of favours, the foodbank also echoed the 'ordinary ethics' that governed the exchange of favours between Romanians. In particular, the foodbank also expected their service users to 'help them help themselves', to borrow Manu's turn of phrase from Chapter 4. This much was apparent in Violeta's appearance on the day in May described above. On the face of it, Violeta's presence seemed to be annoying the other women with her seemingly impolite behaviour and her limited willingness to help out. This tension was common whenever service users showed up for a day of volunteering and often caused more damage than help. For example, one woman once mopped the floor with such a soapy solution that turned it into a slippery hazard, while another volunteer was so eager to clean everywhere that she opened a fire door and the entire building needed to be evacuated.

However, the hierarchy emerging between the volunteers was not simply born out of differences in their ability to work efficiently. A clear division emerged between the more 'established' volunteers like Amalia who had been in the UK for longer, had families, stable incomes, and a regularised immigration status. As Brković reminded us in her introduction to 'vernacular humanitarianism' (2023), helping hands can also enable particular forms of power and inequality, alongside caring and thoughtful practices. On that day in May, the women were irritated with Violeta for reasons greater than the little annoyances that one-off volunteers usually made. They were mainly cross with Violeta for having been let go from a job that one of them had painstakingly arranged for her. The fact that Violeta was once again unemployed bothered the women even more considering that she had a young daughter who, in their eyes, needed her mother to pull herself up by her bootstraps and find permanent work.

The women combined these moral disagreements with a need to care for service users like Violeta, respecting the tacit agreement that governed the space. Despite the annoyances caused by service users-cum-volunteers, the women continued to care for them whenever they came in. On the day above, they gave Violeta tasks, turned a blind eye when she did not do them, and scolded her for any rude behaviour. Although they prefaced their explanations by reflecting on Violeta's past as a care-leaver in Romania and the poverty that followed her entire life, the women motivated their care as reinforcing a kind of motherhood defined by stable, economic activity. Whenever Violeta brazenly brushed off remarks that the state might take her daughter away one day, the women scolded her and told her she needed to find stable work and care for the child herself. By taking her in on one-off volunteering days and arranging work for her, the volunteers sought to provide a role model for Violeta and guide her onto what they saw as the right path. As well as at times reproducing power imbalances, the foodbank mobilised its culturally intimate service provision to help co-nationals in need, as I show below in Doamna Doina's story. I now move on to explain how the practices of the foodbank premised on favours gained an overtly political nature during the COVID-19 pandemic as an avenue to resistance.

Favours as resistance during COVID-19

Doamna Doina, a kind-faced woman in her late fifties, was a regular volunteer at the foodbank. Her deeply-lined face and small frame reminded me of the body of a much older woman, and she would often be on the verge of tears that betrayed both sadness and happiness. Doamna Doina rarely missed a day at the foodbank. Giving a whiff of cheap alcohol, she hugged the volunteers whom she proudly called *fetele mele* ('my daughters'). It was only Mioara she deferentially referred to as *şefa* ('the boss lady'). Both the volunteers and staff attached the respectful *Doamna* ('Mrs') to her first name, and sheltered Doamna Doina from difficult tasks such as lifting heavy items or cleaning behind furniture. When she arrived at the foodbank unable to work due to illness or inebriation, *fetele ei* made her tea and encouraged her to eat, scolding her if she tried to pitch in for the cleaning or other chores.

Doamna Doina arrived in the UK in 2018 when her niece found her a job as a babysitter for a Romanian family in London. After a brief Facebook video-call, Doamna Doina boarded a coach to London where she moved in with the family in exchange for a small salary and room and board. She slept in a small room equipped with a changing table and cot. Alongside caring for the baby, she also cleaned and cooked for the family, but Doamna Doina was no stranger to work that straddled different types of domestic labour. Before coming to London, she had worked in Italy as a *badantă,* a live-in carer for elderly people. Before going to Italy, Doamna Doina had worked as a cleaner in a rural doctor's practice in Romania, where her duties extended to look after the doctor's child and cook and clean for their family. Before getting married and having children, Doamna Doina reminisced about working in a state-owned factory during communism and enjoying some disposable income, with which she bought herself treats like *sicola* (pop) and *creion de ochi* (eyeliner). Since then, her work and limited finances revolved around caring for others – whether her husband and children, the rural doctor's family, a handful of elderly people in Italy, or the baby boy in London.

The last job brought her the most pain. Doamna Doina struggled to retell the story of how the baby boy she looked after had fallen into a pool while on holiday with his parents and eventually passed away after a few months in hospital. This loss plunged Doamna Doina into a boundless depression, amplified by her grief from losing her husband shortly before coming to the UK. Doamna Doina still mourned the death of the little boy a couple of years later, and took pleasure in sharing anecdotes about their trips to the local Romanian shops or the park. She eventually went through a range of other jobs in the UK, working in a school canteen, in a warehouse, and in a cleaning agency. When asked how she found all these jobs, she listed an intricate web of Romanian acquaintances – her partner had a friend whose wife worked at the school, a housemate was friends with the supervisor at the warehouse, or a friend knew someone at the cleaning agency.

Doamna Doina was working at the agency where she was paid cash-in-hand when the COVID-19 pandemic started. She was told to no longer come into work and that she would be called once it was safe to return. The call, predictably, never came. Many businesses did not require agency workers once they reopened and cut expenses in order to survive the shocks of the pandemic. Alongside the agency work, Doamna Doina had also been working on and off as a self-employed cleaner. She declared a minimum income in her annual tax returns, as many Romanian women who work as self-employed cleaners do. This clever hack allows workers on low incomes to pocket most of their salaries and to recover most of the tax they pay each fiscal year. However, this workaround came at a cost during the pandemic. Government support for self-employed people considered past fiscal contributions for eligibility and Doamna Doina did not qualify because of her minimal fiscal record. She asked her *contabilă* ('accountant') whether she would be eligible for benefits, but she was quickly turned away. Left without a job and no other support, she became dependent on her partner's income and needed to move into his shared room. This was when she first heard about the foodbank.

While the English word 'foodbank' would still sound foreign to her, Doamna Doina heard of a place where some Romanians gave free food from a housemate. After going to the foodbank a few times, Doamna Doina asked if they needed an extra pair of hands and agreed to join as a volunteer. Although she wanted to return to work in cleaning, Doamna Doina relished her work at the foodbank where she found camaraderie and enjoyed being useful. She continued to rely on the food parcels and being a volunteer allowed her to slip in some extra items for *copiii mei* ('my children'), the younger couples in her shared house. Besides the food parcels, the foodbank ultimately provided a lifeline for Doamna Doina during the pandemic who was left struggling with depression and unemployment:

> It really got to me that I lost my job and I was… a little bit unwell. I couldn't work anymore. Now I take some treatment. It all piled up, my troubles, and my age. […] I was in a bit of a depression. I plucked up the courage and I said that it's only me that I'm hurting if I hang around and only think of the worst. And I got back up on my feet. I had the courage. Because I have things to live for… And life is worth living, if God gave it to me…

<div align="center">***</div>

The food parcels, work and practices of care and reciprocity present at the foodbank helped Doamna Doina in the aftermath of grief, depression and unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to coming to the foodbank, Doamna Doina had sought the help of other charities and bureaucratic consultants. She had been enrolled in employment programmes by two other charities, but struggled to find work through these channels that helped her with a CV and sporadic online job applications. She had also sought the help of her *contabilă* ('accountant') whom she paid to submit her annual tax return for her self-employed work, as well as being a gatekeeper of all bureaucratic matters including her immigration status. However, when she asked the woman whether she would be eligible for any benefits to help her make ends meet during the pandemic, Doamna Doina was quickly turned away. She once admitted that she felt 'ashamed to be waiting around at the door' to follow-up on this question, so she never applied for any benefits. The fact that the help provided by the foodbank made such a difference in Doamna Doina's life proves curious and echoes the questions launched at the start of this chapter. Why would the poorly-funded foodbank lacking permanent premises make the most difference in her life?

Firstly, I argue that it was due to the fact that the favours and caring practices underpinning the foodbank acted as a continuation of the favours and carework present in Doamna Doina's life and employment record. In her interactions at the foodbank, Doamna Doina related to the other volunteers using kinship terms (my daughters, *fetele mele*) similar to those she attributed to her housemates (my children, *copiii mei*) and her own family. She in turn received care from the other volunteers due to her seniority. Being related to under the polite *Doamna* (Mrs) implicated a level of formality and respect, accompanied by more intimate care practices, such as being made tea, prepared food or listened to

during difficult times. At first glance, these practices mirror the caring practices that Doamna Doina provided in her paid and unpaid carework throughout her life, whether in the Romanian countryside, in Italy, or in London. This parallel becomes complicated by Doamna Doina's blurred role as a service-user-cum-provider, as she worked to support the beneficiaries using the foodbank as well as receiving support from other volunteers herself. These blurry roles also showcase how the favours in Doamna Doina's life continued at the foodbank, where her volunteering acted as a substitute for employment. Similar to her previous work, Doamna Doina found out about the foodbank from an acquaintance, mirroring the importance of *cunoștințe* to find employment throughout her entire working life (with the exception of state-provided employment under communism when she was not well-connected enough to secure a job away from the factory floor). At the recommendation of a housemate, she started using the foodbank and built a friendship with Roxana, which allowed her to start volunteering. Despite being unpaid, Doamna Doina treated her work at the foodbank as a substitute for employment, listening to and working hard not to disappoint *șefa* ('boss lady'). Her work brought her satisfaction, socialisation, and more ready access to the donated food. As Liisa Malkki (2015) explained, people often volunteer because they are in need themselves – for something to do, to feel connected to the world, or simply for a reprieve from loneliness. Volunteering therefore emerges as a 'self-humanizing' practice (Malkki, 2015:261) to craft oneself into ethical and socially-aware persons. Volunteering occupied a similar place for Doamna Doina, turning her into a person who was active and useful, and situating her within a web of favours that did not stop at the gates of the foodbank. For example, Mioara often invited Doamna Doina to join her and Roxana at church and drove her to medical appointments, such as getting her COVID-19 vaccine.

Rather than following strict distinctions, volunteers like Doamna Doina straddled the roles of service-users-cum-providers at the foodbank. Their experiences showcase the reciprocity and belonging to be found in this ambiguous, yet productive relationship and in the space of the foodbank more broadly. In Doamna Doina's case, the favours and reciprocity at the heart of the foodbank provided a lifeline during the pandemic, whether in terms of the social support she painfully needed or the couple bags of food on which she grew to rely every week. These favours and reciprocity tapped into the gaps left by the state during the pandemic. For many other people who came to the foodbank, whether they were volunteers or service users, the nature of service provision reliant on favours and reciprocity meant they received some help despite not qualifying for the government support meant to maintain livelihoods during the pandemic.

Beyond illustrating how the provision of support at the foodbank acted as an extension of the favours already present in her life, Doamna Doina's example above also showcases the political character of this particular example of 'vernacular humanitarianism'. It showcases how the foodbank emerged a space of resistance where different kinds of labour and mobilities were valorised, in contrast to the norms of deservingness set out by the 'host' state. In Doamna Doina's case, the foodbank continued to weave the web of favours present in Romanians' lives and utilised these together with the

legitimacy it gained through its strategic use of bureaucracy to step in and fill in the gaps left in the British state's pandemic response. Rather than only patching these gaps, the practices of the foodbank at times actively reproduced the kinds of labour and mobility that were deemed undeserving of support by the state. Doamna Doina's example proves particularly illuminating in this regard as her mobility as an older, single woman and her reliance on poorly-paid domestic care work stood in clear opposition to the state's imagination of deservingness and what kind of labour was worthwhile during the pandemic.

The poorly paid and insecure care work that punctuated Doamna Doina's life was valorised and made useful within the context of the foodbank. Her caring labour allowed her to help other Romanians as a volunteer, to receive care from other volunteers, and to harvest the benefits of volunteering as a 'self-humanizing practice' (Malkki, 2015:261). At the same time, this caring labour was rejected and devalorised by the British state's pandemic support which identified the household as the only locale of care. Based on extensive ethnographic and survey research during the pandemic, Laura Bear and colleagues highlighted how pandemic restrictions created a 'kinwork and care deficit' (2020:4) by cutting off the social ties and networks on which many individuals in the UK relied. Strict restrictions based on 'social distancing' dismissed the importance of inter-household ties (explored in Chapters 3 and 4) and provided negligible financial support for community centres, refuges and day centres (such as the foodbank). Doamna Doina's reliance on the caring labour of other volunteers at the foodbank illustrates how care continued to operate in spaces outside of individual households, in spite of restrictions and the lack of government support. The foodbank acted as a space of resistance where these caring practices could be reaffirmed and remade amid the pandemic. However, these practices of resistance came at a severe cost due to their lack of importance in the eyes of policymakers. Rather than accessing targeted support, the foodbank relied on Mioara's careful negotiation and reciprocal relationship with the council (as outlined at the start of this chapter) to set up a service that would allow these practices of care to exist.

Doamna Doina's story also showcases how the foodbank acted as a site of resistance by valorising the kinds of labour that were deemed unworthy of state support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being a worker, Doamna Doina did not receive furlough during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the British government went through various iterations of furlough in terms of the amount of pay or eligibility throughout the pandemic, one condition remained steadfast: employers would decide which workers would be furloughed and which were essentially let go overnight. Although agency workers were eligible for furlough, many employers prioritised their direct employees and saw agency workers as an expense that they could no longer afford. Since Doamna Doina often went from agency to agency with the help of her connections, she unsurprisingly did not make the cut for furlough at the cleaning agency where she worked just before the pandemic started and were she received pay cash-in-hand. Her spotty fiscal record as a self-employed cleaner similarly did not grant her access to pandemic state support. Government support for self-employed workers, the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS), considered past fiscal contribution for eligibility where

workers had been in work for two tax years and could evidence that half of their income derived from their self-employed work. Since Doamna Doina declared the minimum amount possible on her Self-Assessment, she did not qualify for any of the SEISS support payments.

Cash-in-hand work and a reliance on personal ties and spotty employment did not guarantee eligibility for pandemic support in the eyes of the state. Instead, it was the figure of the formally employed and bureaucratically-literate worker that was constructed as warranting support. Failure to keep records and to access formal employment acted as barriers to many migrants receiving support. However, their cheap labour remained essential to entire sectors, from cleaning to construction where their contributions as 'key workers' continued to reproduce British society. Nevertheless, the British state became absolved of any responsibility for the workers' wellbeing. During the pandemic, this meant that those in most precarious positions fell off the radar from the very start. What they were left with was to return to their personal connections and creative workarounds to make ends meet. This patchwork of (failed) state support was not uncommon in the lives of the Romanians I met in London, whether as a researcher or in my job as a caseworker. The very absence of bureaucratic records in some Romanians' lives acted as a catalyst for the lack of support they received from the state during the pandemic. For many of them, especially women, combining different sources of cash-in-had work, self-employment, and other forms of assistance or income (e.g. student loans) meant that they fell through the cracks of support which privileged the masculine figure of the full-time employee or the resilient neoliberal self-employed agent.

Conclusion

This chapter showed how the 'duty to help' and its reliance on favours continued in a community association where Romanian staff and volunteers attempted to help their co-nationals. Unlike other organisations, foodbank staff did not have any formal training in service provision, nor did the material space and practices of the foodbank follow clear bureaucratic norms or practices. The foodbank employed bureaucracy strategically to secure funding and represent Romanians to local authorities, while also going beyond the bureaucratic impulse to fill in gaps in state support with material and culturally intimate help. It used a combination of bureaucracy and favours to reify and convey the needs of Romanians to the local authority. The foodbank used the legitimacy it gained through bureaucracy to formalise the 'duty to help' and provide assistance to Romanians in need. When the state grew uncaring towards Romanians during the pandemic, it was the informal connections and practices of the foodbank that shouldered the burden of care and worked to prevent hunger and destitution.

The continuity of this engagement meant that the foodbank often presented bureaucratic assistance in people's lives in a way that felt personable and, in many cases, in the only way accessible to many Romanians. It was no coincidence that the single mother facing eviction who had been passed from charity to charity continued to receive help from the foodbank, despite being rejected by similar

organisations. The combination of favours and bureaucracy at the heart of service provision ensured that such cases remained at the foodbank. Despite this 'positive' outcome of the foodbank's unique service provision, their help sometimes also fell short. The 'vernacular humanitarian' practices of the foodbank could also reproduce norms of deservingness, such as full-time employment or motherhood, as illustrated using Violeta's example. Moreover, in the five years since its inception, the small organisation moved premises four times. It had no permanent staff besides Mioara, her sister, and a few other trustees who painstakingly tried to juggle the governance of an organisation, the practicalities of running a foodbank and the complex bureaucratic needs of its beneficiaries.

Outside of its ethnographic and empirical insights, the practices of the foodbank showcased the political affordances of favours. By prioritising these culturally intimate practices in its service provision, the foodbank valorised the kinds of labour and mobility often discounted by the state, both during, before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Like in the case of Doamna Doina, the caring and reciprocal practices of the foodbank rendered her gendered and informal work valuable, both as a component of service provision and as deserving of help during the pandemic. However, despite the availability of help such as the foodbank, other types of political affordances emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stemming from and extending beyond Romanians' exchange of favours, the following and final chapter focuses on these other vernacular political forms I encountered among Romanians in London during the pandemic through the medium of conspiracy theories.

Chapter 6: From the *nanocip* to 'a plot of land to live off': Conspiratorial thinking and vernacular politics

On a cold January morning just before *Bobotează* (Epiphany or Theophany for Christian Orthodox believers), I heard Camelia and Marcel arguing in loud, angry voices. Camelia knocked on my door and asked me if I could help her talk to baby Magdalena's nursery on the phone. Marcel was sent home with the baby on account of her having a fever, but Camelia claimed this was untrue and that the baby was restless because of teething pains. We both took the baby's temperature, which turned out normal. Camelia quickly rang the nursery who insisted that it was their COVID-19 policy to send home any infants with a temperature and that the baby could not return to nursery. As Camelia and I spoke on the phone, Marcel's angry voice continued to ring in the background. The nursery stood their ground and baby Magdalena remained home for the day. Marcel did not have any work planned, but he had promised to help the priest prepare holy water for *Bobotează* and left promptly. I agreed to help Camelia look after the baby and her oldest who was home from school, and we spent the day cleaning the house and entertaining the children.

After dinner, Camelia and I reflected on the morning's events and the new COVID-19 regulations. Only one day previously, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the third national lockdown in England due to a new virus variant, shutting all public schools (but not private nurseries) and instructing people to 'stay at home'. Camelia was irritated by these new rules that she connected to baby Magdalena being sent home from nursery, despite the fact that babies ran fevers and were irritable for many reasons besides COVID-19. Rolling her eyes at the nursery's policies, she explained that those who have the guts to flaunt the rules should just carry on with their lives: *Dacă eşti tare şi ai coloană vertebrală şi aşa, mergi. Dacă eşti prost, stai.* ('If you are strong and have a backbone, you can go [outside]. If you're stupid, you stay [indoors].'). Despite her bravado, Camelia was concerned that the only way for the third lockdown to end would be for everyone to have the COVID-19 vaccine. She promptly declared she will not have the vaccine or give it to her children, questioning why the government encouraged people to get the vaccine while also instructing them to 'stay at home'. Before giving me a chance to reply, Camelia quickly explained that the only purpose of the vaccine was *să ne controleze* ('to control us'). After all, no one knew what the vaccine contained, nor how it was produced so quickly, she reasoned. Camelia recounted how their local priest reflected on this during his Sunday sermon, discouraging parishioners from having the vaccine on account of it being poisonous and potentially deadly. Camelia repeated this advice solemnly and concluded that she will not have the vaccine and risk infection instead. After all, she proclaimed that she 'agreed with Boris': *Cine trăieşte, trăieşte. Cine moare, moare.* ('Who lives, lives. Who dies, dies.')

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Camelia's claims about the vaccine and her discontent with pandemic governance were not isolated among my participants. Especially during the third lockdown that started in January 2021, many of my participants were irritated by another lockdown and questioned the efficacy of the new COVID-19 vaccine. The vaccine and regulations were also discussed in households, in the news, and on social media outside of the Romanian community. Since the SARS-Cov-II virus began to spread globally, the vaccine became the most anticipated solution to stop the ensuing pandemic and rolling news coverage documented the race for its development. Vaccination and the refusal to get the COVID-19 vaccine therefore became a polemic topic and the subject of urgent academic analysis for anthropologists and social scientists more broadly (Kasstan, 2021; Sobo and Drążkiewicz, 2021; Sturm and Albrecht, 2021; Peters and Besley, 2022). These analyses often focused on why certain social groups were not engaging with the vaccination campaign, for instance pointing out how the systemic institutionalised racism in the UK meant that some minority ethnic groups, such as Black or Pakistani ethnic groups (Robertson *et al.*, 2021), were more likely to be sceptical about the COVID-19 vaccine (Sandset, 2021; Woodhead *et al.*, 2022). In this chapter, I also start by asking why so many of the Romanians I met appeared sceptical about or refused to have the COVID-19 vaccine. Rather than focusing on the public health effects of this scepticism, I instead aim to showcase how conspiracy and scepticism about the COVID-19 vaccine and the pandemic were indicative of a much wider, slowly simmering political subjectivity for my participants.
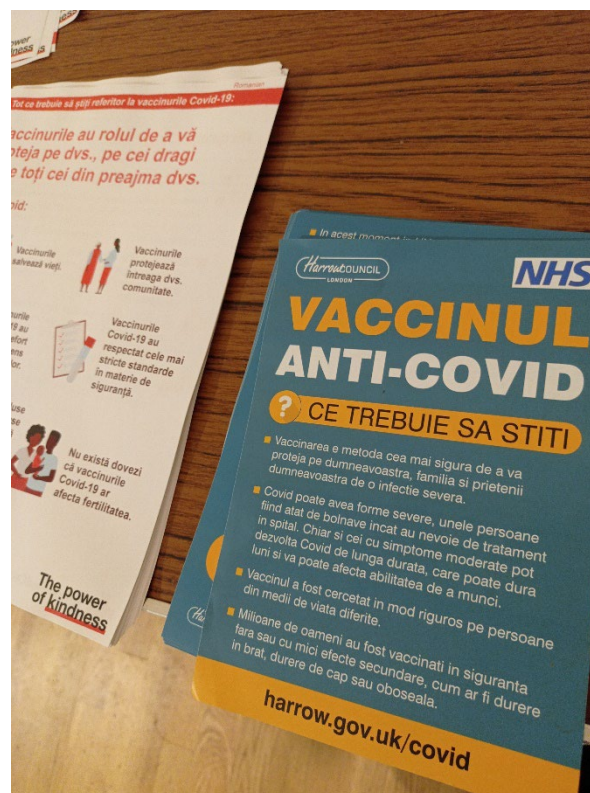

Figure 9: Flyers about the COVID-19 vaccine translated to Romanian. Photographed at the foodbank I describe in Chapter 5.

When analysing my participants' political attitudes, vaccination hesitancy and refusal provided a seemingly unrelated yet fruitful line of enquiry. Although evident in everyday conversations and ethnographic encounters, it is difficult to quantify the suspicion shown by Romanians in London toward the COVID-19 vaccine. Publicly available data about vaccination uptake among Romanians is limited and paints an incomplete picture. In national data on vaccination uptake, Romanians are most likely to be included in the wider ethnic category of 'White Other', of which over half were estimated to have received three Covid vaccines until December 2021, compared to nearly seven in ten for the majority White British population (ONS, 2022). However, this data only refers to those who were registered with a general practitioner (GP) in 2019 and whose data could be linked to the 2011 Census. Given that many of the Romanians I met arrived in the UK after 2011 and some were not registered with a GP (especially those most sceptical about the vaccine), this data is likely unrepresentative and overestimates the degree of vaccine acceptance for my participants. Despite the unreliability of national statistics, data collected by local authorities may paint a more comprehensive picture, but it remains largely inaccessible to the public. Access to this data is limited to public health authorities and local councils, especially in the few cases when it specifies which groups have a lower vaccine uptake (Local Government Association, 2022). Figures are often available for the number of vaccinations carried out in a particular local authority, but the personal characteristics of those who are vaccinated are not included in most publicly available datasets (personal correspondence with Barnet Council, 2022).

Although data on vaccination is difficult to source, the efforts of local authorities and various government agencies where Romanians live serves as a useful yardstick for the hesitancy shown by many of my interlocutors. A key example is the borough of Barnet, home to an estimated 13,430 Romanians (ONS, 2024), where I lived during my fieldwork and spoke not only with Romanians who seemed suspicious about the vaccine, but also with community associations and council officials who strived to increase the COVID-19 vaccine uptake among Romanians. A range of NHS flyers translated to a clumsy, overtly formal Romanian were regularly distributed on street corners and sent to community organisations (see Figure 9 above). At the local foodbank where I volunteered once a week (described in Chapter 5), these colourful flyers were stuffed into food parcels and taped askew to the wall. On the local high street, large brightly coloured billboards showing the friendly face of a young Romanian woman encouraged vaccination (see Figure 10 below). The poster caption read 'I can't wait to feel safe travelling home to Romania and the rest of Europe', followed by a string of colourful emojis including the Romanian flag. In May 2021, the council organised a vaccination clinic at a local GP surgery specifically for Romanians that was promoted in local newspapers and even appeared on a news broadcast on Romanian national television. The success of this event remained unclear as the council failed to collect data on how many of the twenty attendees who were vaccinated that day were in fact Romanian (personal correspondence with Barnet Council, 2022). In parallel to these efforts to improve vaccine uptake, many Romanians discussed the matter around dinner tables, in playgrounds while watching their children, or in the many Romanian businesses on the local high street. When the vaccine

was first administered to 91-year-old Margaret Keenan on 8 December 2020, my interlocutors did not seem to celebrate the new vaccine. Most of my conversations during the months of December and January 2021 revolved around the COVID-19 vaccine. The scepticism in these conversations took many forms, from statement that the vaccine had been poorly tested to fully-fledged conspiracy theories connecting the vaccine with other well-known conspiracies such as the New World Order or the Illuminati, which argue that a secret global network of wealthy elites control our lives.

In this chapter, I propose the concept of conspiratorial thinking to analyse and place these sceptical views into historical and cultural context. I argue that conspiratorial thinking was the mark of an ever-growing political subjectivity within which different historicities and attitudes towards the state were knotted together for my participants, stretching beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than being an experience exclusive to Romanians in London or abroad elsewhere, I argue that conspiratorial thinking was simply intensified by experiences of mobility. Lastly, I show how conspiratorial thinking was quickly exploited by a new far-right political party during the Romanian Parliamentary elections of December 2020.

Figure 10: Billboard for a COVID-19 public health campaign led by Barnet Council using a photograph of Anca, a Romanian Council employee.

Taking conspiracy seriously: lessons from the conspiracy theory literature

The fertile anthropological literature on conspiracy theory poses some key lessons for the analysis in this chapter. Forming somewhat of a genre in its own right (see Boltanski, 2014), the existing literature treats conspiracy theories as legitimate explanations of the social world, focusing not only on the substance of their claims, but also on how and why they emerge and how they circulate. Anthropological literature excels in this effort to take conspiracy seriously, resisting the urge to either investigate the so-called truth of the matter or to debunk conspiracy theories as irrational beliefs (Pelkmans and Machold, 2011). In a seminal volume on conspiracy, Marcus introduced the term 'paranoid thinking' (1999), focusing on the link between rumour, conspiracy, and modernity at the turn of the millennium. At a time of rapid socio-economic and political changes in the wake of the Cold War and a heightened interconnectedness due to globalisation and advances in technology, paranoid thinking was theorised as more than a set of uninformed ideas, but as a 'practice born out of a world that cries out for interpretation' (Stewart, 1999:16). Paranoid thinking was in turn declared an element of modern subjectivity, inspiring anthropologists to analyse the rising number of millenarian conspiracies as legitimate interpretations of a rapidly changing world (Faubion, 2001; West and Sanders, 2003).

Another strand of literature, mostly originating from medical anthropology, built on these accounts to locate conspiracy theories as a practice specific to marginalised people, closely reflecting their historical experiences of abuse and inequality (Briggs, 2004; Behrend, 2007; Pop, 2016; Drążkiewicz Grodzicka, 2021). These anthropologists examined conspiracy theories not as a social problem, but as a means of understanding the inequalities present in their participants' lives (Drążkiewicz Grodzicka, 2021; Keenan, 2006). For example, Briggs (2004) theorised conspiracy as a means for indigenous people to counter prejudice during the cholera outbreak in Venezuela in the early 1990s. Conspiracy theories of how cholera was transmitted disrupted the hegemonic public discourse, which included claims that everyday indigenous practices led to higher rates of cholera infection, and instead shone a light onto the racialised inequalities present within the public health system. Fassin (2011) similarly posited that groups that have been historically discriminated against are more prone to conspiracy theories, especially in cases where mistrust towards medicine and science is complemented by experiences of racialisation and abuse. But while the marginality of conspiracy was significant, these ethnographic accounts did not simply equate propensity for conspiracy with marginalisation. Often flourishing in the margins, they showed how conspiracy theories are contingent on the cultural and historical context in question, often underpinned by deeply entrenched inequalities.

Rooted in this need for contextualisation, a third strand of anthropological literature focuses on the role of conspiracy theories in articulating social and political dissent (Boyer, 2006; Skinner, 2014; Mathur, 2015a; Bovensiepen, 2016). For instance, Dominic Boyer (2006) described the conspiratorial knowledge shared by his interlocutors in a Berlin pub (*stammtisch*) as a therapeutic means of linking

contemporary German selfhood with the historical legacy of authoritarianism in the German Democratic Republic. The therapeutic nature of conspiracy rested on its ability to interrupt the link between the recent authoritarian past and contemporary life. The role of conspiracy theories as a tool for linking historical events to the present takes a more pronounced turn in anthropological accounts of right-wing and populist politics (Moore and Sanders, 2002; Kalb, 2009; Pasieka, 2017, 2019; Vine and Carey, 2017; Holmes, 2019). Holmes (2019:64) described how fascism 'at eye level' in Europe relies on conspiracy to tie together invocations of the past with the contingencies of everyday life. Comparing conspiratorial narratives in Italy, London, and the European Parliament, he explained how 'illicit discourses' (Holmes, 2019:63) underwrite the shift from marginal political movements to mass political currents of present-day European fascism. There are countless similar examples as the anthropology of fascism is an ever-expansive area of study. What is key to note for now, as Drążkiewicz Grodzicka (2021) aptly explains, is that this sub-field continues the anthropological mission of taking conspiracy theories seriously started by Marcus's (1999) theorisation of 'paranoid thinking', but expands it to include a cautionary warning. Rather than treating conspiracy as a means of exposing certain truths about the world that may shine brighter at the margins of society, conspiracy must also be monitored as a threat to democracy and as a source of hateful speech capable of spreading prejudice and even inciting to violence.

My theorisation of Romanians' conspiratorial thinking builds on three main lessons from this brief summary of the anthropological literature about conspiracy theories. Offering a suitable preamble to my ethnographic encounters, my first point of convergence with the literature is the effort to take conspiracy seriously, a key tenet of anthropological enquiry across the board. In the wider literature on conspiracy theories, scholars often state their approval of the 'truth' for fear of being perceived as agreeing with their participants (Drążkiewicz Grodzicka, 2021). When it comes to researching 'unlikeable' people, the real contradiction may however be that researchers come to build rapport, like and even deeply care for their participants despite their politics (Pasieka, 2019). This quickly became the case during my fieldwork. I initially struggled to engage when some interlocutors casually undermined the pandemic or offered arguments against vaccination, whether conspiratorial or not. It became even more difficult to navigate these conversations once I had the vaccine myself and eventually fell ill with COVID-19 together with the Boian household. However, narratives of scepticism and suspicion about the virus and the vaccine peppered many of my conversations and my relationships in the field. The Boians refused vaccination and were genuinely concerned to hear I had been vaccinated myself. When I explained that the vaccine would protect the people I worked with, Marcel joked that I should bribe the nurse at the vaccination centre in exchange for a vaccination certificate so I could prove to the university that I had been vaccinated and escape unharmed. The Boians' concerns about the vaccine were shared by their friends and family in conversation during barbeques, children's birthday parties, or occasional visits. Conspiratorial narratives about the pandemic and the vaccine did not simply exist within our household or in the conversations I had with other Romanians, but they found their way

into local Romanian priests' sermons, flourished on social media, and eventually ended up in the Romanian Parliament (Despa and Wesolowsky, 2021).

In understanding these prevalent ideas, we must recognise the unique position anthropologists have in this situation – not as investigative journalists seeking to uncover the truth, nor as scientists or medical debunkers (see Grodzicka and Harambam, 2021). As Theodossopolous recently argued (2022), it is for anthropologists to consider how we can take these voices seriously, while remaining critical to their content as well as to our assumptions. In anthropology, the business of taking one's participants seriously has a long tradition that falls beyond the scope of this chapter. Rita Astuti (2017) aptly summarised three main 'moves' of taking participants seriously, which can be useful for my purposes here. First, she argues that one needs to take seriously the fact that interlocutors 'say things that do not quite add up' (Astuti, 2017:119), but that ethnography can be used to see how these contradictions play out in social situations. The dilemma of 'things not adding up' is key to conspiratorial thinking where many of the ideas put forward seemed incompatible not only on paper, but also stood in contradiction with my interlocutors' actions in everyday life. The second 'move' of taking people seriously revolves around paying attention to their stories, 'for it is people that construct knowledge and ideas, not the other way around' (Astuti, 2017:119). Rather than 'case studies' (Pasieka, 2019), people who engage in conspiratorial thinking require us to understand not only their narratives, but their life histories and the context of their livelihoods, both locally and transnationally. I endeavour to do this throughout this chapter. Third, taking people seriously requires accepting that they are critical and curious in how they interact with the world and others around them (Astuti, 2017). The cardinal sin of the conspiracy theorist in contemporary public discourse is their perceived lack of critical thinking or rationality. However, my interlocutors engaged in their own kinds of research and debate when assembling a conspiratorial narrative. This may have involved religious sermons, private conversations with priests, family or friends whom they deeply trusted, or sporadic scrolling on social media. In this chapter, I focus on the examples of religious sermons and conversations with my interlocutors.

Before delving into the ethnography, I would like to point out two caveats. Not all the Romanians to whom I spoke denied the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine, nor did they all refuse to get the vaccine. Some showed signs of apprehension and listed a range of reasonings – some more conspiratorial than others. A small minority rolled their eyes at their co-nationals who believed that the COVID-19 vaccine would implant them with microchips or make them infertile. Although blurring the conceptual waters, this wide range of opinions does not make the arguments in this chapter any less convincing. Instead, it is important to acknowledge this range of opinions for two key reasons. First, the fact that some Romanians went above and beyond to decry their co-nationals' beliefs shows how prevalent conspiratorial thinking was for my participants. Second, the heterogeneity of perspectives among Romanians counters any reductive, orientalised portrayal of their unmodern or 'backwards' behaviour (Said, 1978) due to their engagement with conspiracy theories. When writing about vaccine resistance in minority or religious communities, it is important to be mindful so as not to turn

participants into scapegoats or reproduce stereotypes about such minority groups (Kasstan, 2021). With these caveats in mind, let us turn to my first ethnographic encounter with conspiracies about the COVID-19 vaccine.

Conspiracy theories and the 'bureaucratic imagination'

My first encounter with conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 vaccine came on the eve of *Bobotează* in 2021, shortly before midnight, when Ileana paid the Boians a visit. I had heard stories of Ileana before, a client-cum-friend of my host family. A blonde, skinny woman in her fifties with a beautiful face, you could easily hear her laughter as soon as she stepped through the front door. Ileana worked as an Uber driver in London, having left Romania a few years after her family's clothing shop went bankrupt after struggling to compete with the huge international retailers that arrived in Romania in the early 2000s. Although reluctant to join her sister in the UK, Ileana concurred that it would be the best way to earn a livelihood. She spoke bitterly about leaving her beloved grandmother behind in Romania, reminiscing about their trips to remote Orthodox monasteries in the countryside. That evening, Ileana dropped by before attending the midnight sermon at the Romanian church down the road, despite barely getting any sleep the previous night. We spoke for about an hour before she left for the service, during which Ileana recounted intricate narratives about the COVID-19 vaccine.

Announced nearly a month before, the vaccine had become the source of significant anxiety and deliberation for Romanians in London. Ileana was determined she would not have it. This was because the vaccine, she explained, contained '*nanoparticule* that can change our DNA' while the virus did not actually exist. If the virus were real, Ileana speculated, governments would handle it differently and not implement restrictions 'like the Communists in the middle of the night'. The virus was nothing more than a cover for the vaccine to be distributed globally, a vehicle for 'them' to control 'us'. The vaccine would implant a *cip* into one's body which would make smartphones and bankcards redundant. The *cip*, she added, worked through newly installed 5G antennae that could control people from afar. However, control and surveillance were not the only goals of the virus and vaccine ploy. Instead, Ileana explained, the virus was a 'silent death' meant to swiftly eliminate those people considered undesirable, like the elderly, and control the growth of the global population, replacing the violence and casualties of war. The vaccine followed as the next step in this plot, because of its ability to kill people instantly with a heart attack or stroke, should they show any resistance to this new way of life. However, Ileana proudly exclaimed that most of the Romanians she knew – 'Christians, [who had been to] Confession and Communion' (*creștini, spovediți și împărtășiți*) – were against the vaccine. They nevertheless risked being lured by material goods ('jobs, houses, cars, work, money') and may therefore be persuaded to have the vaccine.

In contrast to the politicians and experts who served as pawns in her narratives, Ileana repeatedly drew on the words of Romanian priests in London and in Romania as sources of authority

for the ideas she shared with me. One prevalent name was Father Ioan Șarpe. After a thorough Facebook search, I found a copy of a viral recording of a sermon given by Father Șarpe on 5 July 2020 in a North London neighbourhood where many Romanians live (see Figure 11). The video of the sermon, initially shared widely on Facebook groups in London and in Romania, was later denounced by Theodor Paleologu, a historian and former state minister in Romania (see Figure 12). Paleologu compared it to a previous religious scandal in Tanacu, where a nun died following an exorcism in a Romanian monastery which left her severely malnourished and dehydrated. Restating the 'unmodern' character of these practices, Paleologu linked these two events as the doings of religious fundamentalists lacking rationality. In the comments section of Paleologu's post, insults and jokes were made at the expense of the priest and the numerous believers in front of the camera. Despite these provocations, the video continued to be frequently shared on Facebook groups and off-shoots of it circulated widely on Facebook and YouTube even after being repeatedly taken down by the platforms. I first saw the video of the sermon on a Facebook group for Romanians in London in July 2020 but gave it little thought until January 2021 when I started hearing some of the same narratives among my interlocutors. I eventually found the half-hour sermon on a parishioner's public Facebook page. It started along the same lines as Ileana's narrative above:

> This virus was created as a reason, which has no purpose in and of itself, it is just a reason. They created the virus so that they can come up with a vaccine. […] The real purpose is implanting a *nanocip* into people which will give them all the information about people, including the ability to read minds. […] This *nanocip* will be an ID, and health card, and passport, and driving license, and bank card, and everything else that man needs. It will not be mandatory, but optional. And St John the Evangelist says in the Apocalypse:
>
>> 'And in those times, the rulers of the Earth shall seek to put onto all people a sign on their hand or their forehead. And this sign is a number, a number of Man. And he who is wise shall decipher this number. And no one will be able to sell or buy anything without this sign which is the Mark of the Beast.'
>
> […] Those who will not receive the vaccine and the vaccination certificate will not be able to live in this world. […] […] And receiving that *nanocip* and that vaccination certificate is unquestionably equal to selling your soul, forsaking Christ, forsaking God, without any doubt. […] I repeat, the vaccine will not be mandatory, but people will be made to have it because they will not be able to live in this world without it. And then, Man will go and request the sign of the Antichrist of his own accord to be able to remain in this world. […] These times are not far away, they're near, and they're knocking on our door. And that is why there is silence, and you are not being told anything.' (my translation)
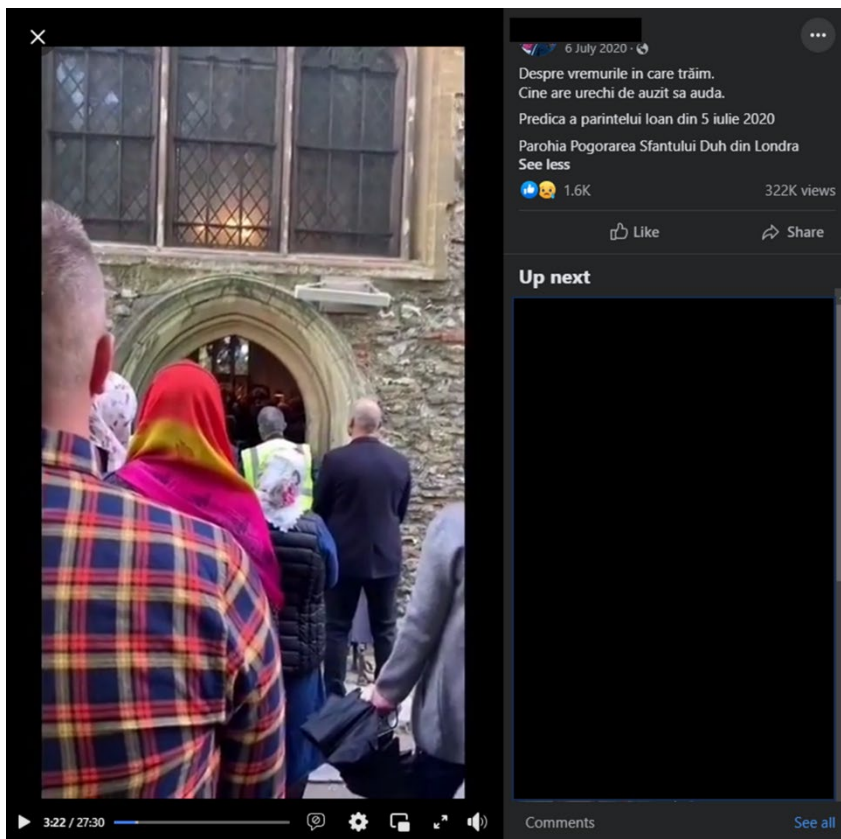
Figure 11: Screenshot of the video recording of the sermon led by Father Ioan Şarpe in July 2020. Retrieved from a parishioner's public Facebook page in 2021, after having been watched over 332,000 times. The post reads: 'About the times we live in. Loud for those who want to open their ears. The sermon of Father Ioan from 5 July 2020. Parish 'The Descent of the Holy Spirit' in London. (my translation)

Figure 12: Screenshot of Theodor Paleologu's commentary about Father Şarpe's sermon, with a link to a recording of the sermon eventually taken down by YouTube. It reads: 'Listen for at least a few minutes to the sermon of Father Ioan Şarpe from London (London, not Tanacu!). It speaks about the vaccine that will innoculate us with a nanochip with the mark of the Beast and about how we will be remote-controlled by the Antichrist through 5 G technology. The region's bishop is surely appalled. But what is he to do? He [probably] told the Father to give up the nonsense, but it circulates, is distributed by some priests and even more by the zealous laity. It's matter-of-course: the more outlandish a foolery is, the more success it has.' (my translation)

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While the narratives of Ileana and Father Șarpe are instantly captivating due to their eschatological premonitions, it is the mundane within these sensational claims that I wish to unpack here. These narratives explain more about the steady contingencies of everyday life than the end-of-the-world scenarios described above. One such mundane constant present in my interlocutors' lives, which underlines the practice of conspiratorial thinking and has already surfaced when discussing the figure of the conman (see Chapter 4), is mistrust. At the beginning of the twentieth century, critical scholars documented how a steady collapse of institutions and a lack of a trusted authority figures led to a demise of expertise and a loss of trust which gave free reign to conspiracy and rumour (Giddens, 1991; Latour, 2004). While numerous theorists focused on the role of trust in society and its links to modernity (Simmel, 1950; Luhmann, 1979; Misztal, 1996; Seligman, 1997; Sztompka, 1999), mistrust has largely been overlooked and glossed over simply as the absence of trust (with some notable exceptions such as Carey, 2017 or Umbreș, 2022). In most of the literature to date, mistrust is cast in negative light as undoing social relations and undermining effective social organisation. However, as Carey (2017) posited, mistrust is a phenomenon that creates social forms in its own right. In his monograph, Carey argued that conspiracy is one such social form rooted in mistrust and based on what he called the 'bureaucratic imagination' (2017:91). He based this concept on his ethnographic work in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco where the infrastructures of everyday life lacked a bureaucratic character, instead relying on the intimate links of affinity and kinship that were rooted in mistrust. Since mistrust formed the basis of social relationships in the High Atlas, conspiracies manifested as narratives about witchcraft and theft. It was the overt absence of bureaucracy that pushed Carey to note the bureaucratic character of conspiracy outside of the Moroccan highlands. Comparing these insights with his fieldwork in Ukraine, Carey (2017) argued that conspiracy was based on a mimicry of the outside world, with the forces behind conspiratorial plots often amounting to nothing more than a shadow of the bureaucratic realities of everyday life. Vine and Carey expanded on this 'fundamentally mimetic nature of conspiratorial thought' (2017:49) which mirrors the infrastructure and everyday contingencies from which it emerges. Building on Weber's (1978) ideal type of bureaucracy, they showed how conspiracy is shaped by bureaucracy, both in terms of content and structure:

> the enemy is imagined as bureaucratic in shape (i.e. modular, distributed and arborescent), in quality (depersonalized and rational) and finally in intention: its goals are secular, frequently opaque and imply the constant expansion of its authority and remit (Vine and Carey, 2017:54).

While the Weberian ideal type of bureaucracy has been disproved ethnographically, it does not fail to live on in its legitimacy. The idealised bureaucratic norms of impersonality or ubiquity continue to occupy conspiracy theorists' minds, since it is often an impeccably organised network of conspirators that pose a threat rather than a singular actor intent on wreaking havoc (Vine and Carey, 2017). Rather than motivated by personal ambition or favour, the bogeymen of conspiracy theories are also seemingly

disinterested by personal gain, and are instead motivated only by the need to control and ultimately amplify their power over others.

Illustrating the mimetic nature of conspiracy, both Ileana and Father Șarpe's narratives mirror the everyday bureaucratic infrastructures for Romanians in London. The rhetorical device at the heart of both conspiracy theories above – the *nanocip* – was bureaucratic in both its use and intention. The implementation of the *nanocip* required the idealised bureaucratic efficiency and organisation often attributed to the state. My participants usually imagined the British state as omniscient and intent on punishing rule breakers. For example, Camelia often scolded me for leaving my address on old delivery boxes, for fear of receiving a fine in the post for littering, should the cardboard end up on the streets in London. The *nanocip* echoed some of these imagined attributes of the state. Rather than the work of one lone wolf hellbent on destruction, the *nanocip* required the apparatus and infrastructure of the state, which in this case was the nation-wide vaccine rollout. After its implementation, the *nanocip* was also expected to assume a bureaucratic form, as Father Șarpe explained, 'this *nanocip* will be ID, and health card, and passport, and driving license, and bank card, and everything else that man needs'. For those who refused vaccination, a lack of access to the *nanocip* as the novel all-in-one bureaucratic tool was equated with an exclusion from employment and consumption, and eventual total exclusion from society. Beyond its implementation and form, the *nanocip* was also a tool to extend the state's grip on power and authority. Both Ileana and Father Șarpe imagined the state – to which they referred under the generic 'they' – as a repressive and coercive entity that sought to dupe its citizens in the interest of controlling them. At the start of Father Șarpe's sermon, the COVID-19 virus was portrayed as nothing more than a reason to implement the vaccine containing the *nanocip* that could be used to read the minds of the unfaithful who agreed to vaccination. Similarly, for Ileana, the vaccine represented a vehicle for 'them' to control 'us' by using the chip to control everyday activities like communication or shopping. In Father Șarpe's narrative, the honesty of the state was once again called into question under the ominous phrase 'and that's why there's silence and you're not being told anything.' This lack of transparency was cemented by the perceived catch-22 behind the COVID-19 vaccine. While public health announcements did not mandate the vaccine, it would become mandatory in practice in order to live in contemporary society in Father Șarpe's explanation. Once again, the state was imagined as duplicitous, relying on covert coercion to impose its grand plan.

For my interlocutors, these imaginaries of a coercive state were partly rooted in the recent historical past of state socialism. As Caroline Humphrey wrote, conspiratorial thought is situated 'first and foremost within particular structures of nationhood and statecraft' (2003:196). For her Buryat Buddhist informants, conspiracy theories were read against the practices and affect of Stalinism, through what she labelled a habit of 'textual interpretation' (reading between the lines) and fear of being punished for one's actions due to expansive state surveillance. For many of my participants, growing up during or in the immediate aftermath of state socialism came with a similar need to read between the lines, a mistrust in state institutions and in fellow citizens, compounded by an internalised fear of

retribution. Parallels to such historical experiences – whether lived experiences or public memory – explicitly underlined some Romanians' conspiratorial accounts of the pandemic. For example, Ileana described what she perceived to be rash and restrictive pandemic restrictions as a result of governments acting 'like the Communists in the middle of the night'. The historical parallel points to the duplicity of politicians during state socialism where the rule of law was instrumentalised to suit the Party agenda and the mechanisms of formal politics were used to uphold the power of the Party-state, such as holding seemingly 'free' elections to eliminate political pluralism rather than to enact the will of the people (see Tismăneanu, 2003:92). In the aftermath of state socialism, the artefacts of a failing state crystalised into what Giordano and Kostova called the 'social production of mistrust' (2001:78). Writing about the faulty process of land restitution in Bulgaria, they argued that mistrust becomes a set a strategies and representations 'that actors follow when a state repeatedly fails to perform its fundamental duties, particularly the responsibility of creating the conditions to guarantee a 'pacified space', in which people can trust one another through the 'rule of law' (2001:75). After all, as Caroline Humphrey (2003) aptly explained, it is unsurprising that conspiracy spreads in the post-socialist space efficiently since these countries were often the place of conspiracy and deception in the recent historical past.

While mistrust flourished within conspiratorial thinking, it also strengthened certain loyalties for my interlocutors. In Ileana and Father Șarpe's narratives, the overt manipulations of the state stood in stark contrast to the social and political values of the community that refused the vaccine. In opposition to the 'they' who engage in covert Malthusian operations to rid the world of undesirable people, Ileana described the morally incorruptible Christian Romanians who were 'against the vaccine'. She juxtaposed the embodied religious rituals of the Communion and Confession with the material promises of contemporary capitalism – 'jobs, houses, cars, work, money' – which may lure Christian Romanians into accepting the vaccine. This dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' sits at the heart of conspiratorial thinking. As Brown and Theodossopoulos argued, conspiracy is 'the work of marginal actors who actively engineer boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and situate responsibility for events beyond them' (2003:333). It is by focusing on this process of inclusion and exclusion that we can make sense of the political dimension and importance of seemingly absurd claims about the *nanocip* or *nanoparticule*. By understanding who is included and excluded, we can make sense of how conspiratorial thinking knots together multiple historicities, with their effects outlasting the COVID-19 pandemic. I turn to this complex knot of different temporalities and their respective imagined qualities to make further sense of conspiratorial thinking.

Aspiring to a 'plot of land to live off'

To place my interlocutors' social and political criticism into context, I turn to the work of the late Romanian anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu and his concept of 'the politics of resentment' (*politică a resentimentului*). Mihăilescu (2018) described how recent Romanian politics were driven by the

resentment felt by a large part of the population. It encompassed a range of social phenomena and historical events: resentment after the fall of communism, resentment about a failure to succeed and secure social mobility, or resentment towards any kind of elites (be them experts or corporatists). The result of this collective resentment was the appropriation of politics by a class of often marginalised people that he called *Teleor men*, after Teleorman county in Southern Romania, the birthplace of a senior Romanian politician jailed for corruption. Teleorman provides the suitable eponym as it is characterised not only by clientelism, but also by intergenerational poverty, subsistence agriculture, excessive out-migration, and an ageing population. Born out of these socio-economic conditions, Mihăilescu defined the *Teleor men* as a 'diffused and frustrated class of *lumpenrurali* who have been waiting for their turn for generations, the time of their historical retaliation' (2018:175, my translation, emphasis in original). He modelled the *Teleor men* on the archetype of the bribe-giving, low-level political wannabe – the person who is loyal to the party in the hope that they will be rewarded with status or money at a time of electoral success. However, he applied the archetype to the wider Romanian population, with *Teleor men* being born everywhere and far from the local political limelight. The result was the slow, but calculated expansion of populism in Romanian society which is 'taking the road towards illiberalism' (Mihăilescu, 2018:180, my translation).

Naturally, Mihăilescu is not the only anthropologist to document resentment and its political aftermath of recent illiberalism and far-right sentiments. From the early 2000s, anthropologists documented how the anger and fear felt as a result of neoliberal rule rendered ethnic or religious neo-nationalism more popular (Appadurai, 2006; Gingrich and Banks, 2006; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris, 2018). In the post-socialist sphere, anger and resentment emerged among the working class as a response to the faulty so-called 'transition' to market capitalism (Kalb, 2009; Ost, 2005; see also Chapter 1). One common thread uniting different ethnographic examples of anger and resentment in post-socialist countries could be the 'internal orientalization' (Buchowski, 2006:467) of workers and peasants who were blamed for their own difficulties and lack of adaptability to the new market regime. In Romania, workers represented the 'prime losers of post-1989 changes' (Kickedel, 1993:128) both materially and symbolically. Suddenly left jobless and with no tether, workers went from being prized in the socialist order (at least in terms of symbolic capital) to being seen as lazy and showing a poor work ethos in comparison to flexible urbanites who adapted to a market democracy more swiftly (see Heintz, 2006). In essence, this concurs with the second lesson from my brief overview of the anthropological literature on conspiracy at the start of this chapter. Conspiracy often blooms in the margins of society, rooted in historical and cultural processes of marginalisation.

To make sense of how the 'politics of resentment' is connected to conspiracies about the COVID-19 vaccine, I must describe the end of Father Șarpe's sermon. A good twenty-five minutes of the sermon had passed and the believers in front of the camera were getting bored, shifting from one foot to the other. Father Șarpe had been telling them about how the vaccine would implant them with a *nanocip* that would allow for them to be controlled, perhaps even killed, at the push of a button. To

avoid this unsavoury end, Father Șarpe encouraged his flock to 'make preparations'. He instructed them to secure a 'plot of land with a hut where you can live, a plot of land to live off'. And this plot of land must be in 'the motherland, in Romania', with parishioners returning to 'the hearths of their forefathers' (*fiecare la vatra părintească*). This was needed, he argued, because the last thirty years of peace and prosperity were a ploy to seduce people into comfort and leave them unable to give up the convenience of everyday life, therefore accepting the Mark of the Beast more easily. Yet, he had faith in his flock. After all, he ended: 'We are all simple people, from the countryside, who are used to a modest livelihood. […] Brothers, the moment of truth is upon us!'

Following this theatrical end of the sermon, it becomes easier to link the 'politics of resentment' to Father Șarpe's flock, whose services can attract as many as three hundred believers every Sunday. Echoing the *Teleor men* described by Mihăilescu, the parishioners' political allegiances were derived from a seductive mix of, on the one hand, experiences of shared marginality and, on the other hand, their devotion to the Orthodox faith and the Romanian nation. The first element of 'the politics of resentment' invoked by Father Șarpe revolved around his parishioners' experiences of rurality and poverty. These experiences are marked by generation upon generation engaging in hard, manual work, mainly in subsistence agriculture or day labour. In the sermon, Father Șarpe invoked this using the image of the idyllic 'plot of land with a hut where you can live, a plot of land to live off'. This image was idyllic as many of the Romanians I met spoke fondly of their childhoods spent helping with the yearly harvest and looking after their family's livestock. Many also saved money to build such a house back in their villages. Marcel and Camelia often bickered about the house they were building back in Romania and for which they were trying to acquire a plot of agricultural land 'to have there, just in case'. If we return to the start of this thesis, we can trace some continuities between Father Șarpe's sermon and Dan's example (see Chapter 1), who decidedly wanted to return to Romania, despite the fact that 'nothing ever changes'. For Dan, the imagined future return to Romania hinged on the possibility of securing a plot of land where he would build a house and, most importantly, where he would be able to 'do what you think is right'.

For my participants, therefore, conspiracy theories were not just a form of social and political criticism, but also a source of agency as they affirmed the world they would like to live in – the fabled 'plot of land to live off'. As Dominic Boyer writes, conspiracy can be therapeutical as it helps ensure that 'the unknowable is knowable and that what is knowable is subject to individual or collective projects of intervention' (2006:331). This ultimately provides agency, even if only in interpretation, about the goings on in the world at large. In Father Șarpe's sermon, the return to idyllic rural life offered his flock an alternative to the Covid vaccine, one which already appealed to many of them. Derived from their experiences of a 'modest livelihood', the parishioners, in their roles as 'simple people, from the countryside', could resist the post-Covid dystopia. Father Șarpe's flock was expected to rejoice in their present and past marginality – whether experienced at an individual or a collective level – to derive agency from it and imagine the life they wished to live. Writing about the political aftermath of the

Cold War, Dzenovska and De Genova reflected on the emergent 'desire for the political' born out of dissatisfaction with conventional politics and pushed by a desire to "overcome the present […] in the name of an alternative (better) future" (2018:3). Despite the hopeful connotations of this alternative future, they warned that hope may not be found in concepts that anthropologists find favourable, but in fact may contribute to the perpetuation of capitalism, right-wing extremism, or religious fundamentalism. In Father Șarpe's sermon, the idyllic rural lifestyle became a shared future born out of resentment towards elites and conventional politics, which in turn reproduced dangerous ideas about the COVID-19 vaccine and promoted conservative religious values such as a return to 'traditional' values of rurality and meekness. The hope for the future inherent to conspiratorial thinking was therefore highly political, if not in a favourable way in the eyes of anthropologists.

The second element of the 'politics of resentment' invoked in Father Șarpe's sermon revolved around the importance of Christian faith, especially Orthodoxy, and its links to the Romanian nation. It should come as no surprise that the Romanian Orthodox church figured so deeply in these conspiratorial narratives, as other scholars have documented how religious values and practices shaped compliance with pandemic restrictions for Orthodox Christians in the UK, Serbia, Greece, and Russia during COVID-19 (Carroll *et al.*, 2022). Some of the Romanian monks cited as having prophesised the pandemic spent decades in Communist prisons – admired by *Teleor men* and Romanian intellectuals alike. Not simply as a source of inspiration, Orthodoxy was at the centre of these narratives as conspiracy theories played on the dichotomy between the secular and the sacred, between religion and modernity. The idyllic rural past was juxtaposed in the end of Father Șarpe's sermon with the modern 'convenience' of the past thirty years that seduced some people into accepting the vaccine. Cheated by experts and politicians alike, the parishioners were warned to return to their shared marginality marked by their rural upbringing and Orthodox faith, in contrast to the foreign and secular scientific expertise of governments and physicians who instituted lockdowns and promoted the COVID-19 vaccine.

Although they are rooted in the fundamental opposition between 'us' and 'them', conspiracy theories can also disrupt and repackage seemingly straight-forward dichotomies (Briggs, 2004). Rather than neatly following the dichotomy between science-religion, my interlocutors' conspiratorial narratives unpack another aspect of religion – its messy link to nationalism and the Romanian nation. Within conspiracy theories, Orthodoxy is not merely a religious notion, but one of culture. Father Șarpe's sermon illustrated this by including the return to Romania, to 'the motherland', as the ultimate move to reject the vaccine. His encouragement to return to the 'home of your forefathers' and their 'modest livelihood' did not refer, for example, to the off-the-grid lifestyle of North American conspiracy theorists who abandon civilisation. For Father Șarpe's parishioners, the retreat was deeply embedded in the imagined collective past of the Romanian nation linked to working and living off the land.

As much as it is a future-oriented notion, the 'plot of land to live off' and the return to the 'motherland' were born out of a specific historical and political context – the role of rurality and

agricultural land in recent Romanian nation-building projects. Ties to the land and rural property regimes have been key to Romanian nation-building both before, during, and in the aftermath of state socialism (Verdery, 1996). At the beginning of the twentieth century when Romania assumed its current geopolitical borders, agricultural property regimes were central to the project of nationhood, despite the urban pioneers of modernisation seeking to undermine the country's rural character (Boia 2017 [1997]). Their efforts of modernisation took an unexpected turn with the after-war introduction of state socialism, within which the process of collectivisation significantly changed rural property regimes and political belonging. The collectivisation of agriculture started in 1948 with the seizure of privately-owned agricultural land and livestock by the Party-state, at a time where over three quarters of the population lived in the countryside, and required threats, coercion, and violence to ensure compliance (Kligman and Verdery, 2011; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010; Mungiu-Pippidi & Althabe, 2002; see also Chapter 1). Peasants did not go quietly, but engaged in a wide range of dissenting practices, such as falsely declaring smaller plots of land than they actually owned or filling sacks of grain partly with sand to deceive Party officials. For most Romanian peasants, collectivisation was 'a grievous assault on their very conceptions of themselves as human beings' (Kligman and Verdery 2011:4).

After the fall of state socialism, land and property regimes continued to represent an important nation-building tool in Romania (Dorondel, 2005; Verdery, 2003; 1996; 1998). Land became central to state-making processes that sought to bring the economic and social order closer to a new capitalist identity. As Dorondel aptly wrote, 'people, economies, and landscapes had to be re-arranged in order to bring the country "into Europe"' (2016:9). This process included transforming poverty-stricken peasants into capitalist farmers who could produce for the market with the overall aim of improving living standards in the country, a process no longer overseen by the Party-state, but by a faulty local and national state apparatus under the gaze of international bodies like the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank (Verdery, 1996, 2003). However, the shift towards market production in agriculture was rejected by peasants. Rural life was instead marked by a return to family plots used for subsistence agriculture, not only for the impoverished rural population but also for the urbanites who suddenly became unemployed (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010). Like collectivisation decades earlier, the process of land and property restitution was not frictionless, and the state failed to create effective ownership, with the value and access to land built on the remnants of social hierarchies from state socialism (Verdery, 2003). Ethnographies of decollectivisation attest to how land was returned according to the will of a 'predatory elite' (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010:128) of local mayors and their acolytes (Dorondel, 2005, 2016; Kickedel 1993; Verdery 1996, 2003). Later reforms introduced by EU accession in part deepened these brokerage networks, for example when access to funding continued to rely on local power hierarchies (Fox, 2011).

Rooted in this historical context, an ideological dichotomy of the village emerged in Romanian public discourse, with political consequences that can be traced to the contemporary 'politics of resentment'. As Mungiu-Pippidi (2010) attested, the archetypal Romanian village was ideologically stuck between two extremes – either the idealised village of tranquillity and permanence, or the

disadvantaged village characterised by deprivation and in desperate need of modernisation by external intervention:

> The former is an idealized, exceptional village, wherein external influences can at most shatter the illusion of an ahistoric, perfect balance; the latter is a real-life village, where impoverished people suffer and are deprived of basic resources, a place which can be saved only by comprehensive, externally induced transformations (Mungiu-Pippidi 2010:6).

This brief insight into the substantial literature linking rural land regimes and Romanian nation-building helps contextualise my interlocutors' will to return to 'a plot of land to live off' and trace the resentment described by Mihăilescu to its historical origins.[37] The two archetypes described above are helpful to connect the end of Father Șarpe's sermon to the wider 'politics of resentment' since both archetypes were present in the representation of the countryside within the sermon. Under the idyllic 'plot of land to live off', the sermon invoked the image of an ahistorical village where parishioners could seek refuge from the effects of the COVID-19 vaccine and, by extension, from the malevolent governance of the state, as explored at the beginning of this chapter using Carey's (2017) bureaucratic imagination. The archetype of the unmodern village in need of intervention was also present, since the rural lifestyle portrayed in the sermon is contrasted with the 'convenience' of modern life.

Beyond the overt invocations of these archetypes, the tension between these different governing ideologies is what links conspiratorial thinking – and Father Șarpe's sermon as an illuminating example – to the wider 'politics of resentment'. In Romanian politics, the archetypes described by Mungiu-Pippidi (2010) have created fertile ground for resentment to take roots. On the one hand, established political parties have steadily relied on rural votes for their electoral success. The humorous image used by Romanians to describe this phenomenon is local politicians offering buckets filled with food staples (such as maize flour, wheat flour, or sunflower oil) to the impoverished rural electorate days before an election. These fraudulent practices to sway voters are in turn sneered at by the those who see the rural milieu as deprived and in dire need of modernisation. This modernising attitude permeates the efforts of anti-corruption, right-wing and central parties in their different iterations, and is reflected in the opinions of their mainly urban-dwelling voters (Mihăilescu, 2018). Despite their intentions to improve quality of life, the modernising attitude in turn fails to understand how everyday life and political belonging is structured in villages. As Mungiu-Pippidi's (2010) two archetypes explain, rural inhabitants are instead stripped of their political agency, and real transformation is envisaged as only possible through external intervention. Located in this tension between their role as either a corrupt electorate or a homogenous group stripped of agency and requiring outside intervention, many of my participants turned to conspiratorial thinking. Whether hailing from the countryside or simply

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[37] These discussions also provide a useful context for Camelia and Marcel's decision to buy some land in their native village in Romania to have 'just in case', as Camelia phrased it in Chapter 1.

sympathetic to these narratives, the seductive mixture of intergenerational poverty and devotion to the Orthodox faith and the Romanian nation irrevocably ran through conspiracy theories about COVID-19, as illustrated in Father Șarpe's sermon. Some believers like Ileana, whose narratives I described above, mobilised similar narratives in their conspiratorial thinking and even derived a sense of agency from it. My aim here is not to romanticise conspiratorial thinking as a mere practice of Romanians' rejoicing in their past marginality and asserting their agency. Instead, I also show how conspiratorial thinking at times also drew on potentially dangerous ideas and processes of othering. Often, undesirable 'others' got added to the mix, as it became clear during my conversations with Andrei, to which I turn next.

The dark side of conspiratorial thinking and its links to the 'other'

In the spring of 2021, I had a few interviews with Andrei over video-chat. I would often see Andrei in the Boians' house, as he was one of Marcel's closest business associates and friends outside of his extended family. In his mid-thirties, Andrei worked as an Uber driver for which he rented a car from Marcel. Although he started studying economics at university in Romania at his father's insistence, he dropped out and worked as a driver for a while. He had a brief stint of working on a farm in Italy but decided to leave when pay started arriving later and later. A friend who had been living in Britain for a couple of years offered to help him, so Andrei arrived in the UK shortly after New Year in 2015. Since then, he went through a range of low-paid jobs, from cash-in-hand work on a construction site to working in a traveling circus to agency work that sent him all over London. Despite the hurdles along the way, Andrei described his life in the UK in a language of comfort and small luxuries. With the money he earned driving around London, he could afford to own a luxury German-made car and sporadic holidays, while his wages as a driver in Romania were barely enough to buy a second-hand car.

During our interviews, we spoke for about an hour at a time while Andrei smoked cigarettes, popped into the Romanian corner shop, or simply killed time while waiting for Uber clients. I grew accustomed to his hesitant, but fast-paced speech and took scrap notes based on our blurry conversations. Stretching close to two hours, our third conversation focused exclusively on the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccine. Back then in March 2021, COVID-19 was on many Romanians' minds. Even if the third national lockdown ended, my interlocutors remained sceptical that the government would not impose more restrictions or that another COVID-19 variant would not force them into their homes once again. As the vaccination programme opened to more and more of the population, scepticism about COVID-19 crystalised into a reluctance to have the vaccine. Andrei was no different.

Concerned about the alleged side effects of the vaccine, Andrei refused the Covid vaccine despite being overweight and deemed 'at risk' by the NHS. He dodged calls from his GP and ignored texts from the NHS, explaining that the pandemic had been exaggerated by public health campaigns and mass media. He was convinced that COVID-19 was no different from the common cold, a claim

he supported with anecdotal evidence and Facebook videos allegedly showing empty COVID-19 field hospitals. Andrei questioned why neither he, nor his housemates who continued to work during the pandemic, got sick with COVID-19 despite coming into contact with hundreds of strangers everyday at work, on London's crammed buses or on the stuffy Underground. Despite his initial concern about the virus, Andrei explained how the virus did not warrant the severity of the situation, with governments and mass media acting as scaremongers:

> After two months I reached the conclusion that the virus actually exists, [but it is] not as dangerous and as deadly as governments want to make it on TV and in mass media and everywhere. […] All these things that I saw and the fact that it's not as dangerous as *they* want to show us.

At this point, I noticed I had struck a nerve. Andrei spoke rapidly and without prompting, eager to share his beliefs and discoveries about COVID-19. At first, he equated the 'they' who would wish to exaggerate the severity of the virus with 'governments', but soon broadened the scope of the term to act as a catch-all for money and power more generally:

> Governments, they are those who want to show this and impose these restrictions on us […] What can I say, maybe it's a conspiracy theory [laughs] the New World Order, the world's richest […] *Whether it is a conspiracy theory, whether it isn't, I think all of these things have been done for the money* […] because there are people who made a lot of money from masks. *Aaa*! Another decision that made me not believe [in COVID-19]: the masks were bought from China […] After 3 months, there wasn't a peep out of [China], they were selling masks in Europe and all over the world. […] For money, from masks, tests, etc.

> Also, they each pushed hard to get the vaccine out […] on average 12 Euros per vaccine […] Do you know how many billions we are? You don't need to do a lot of maths…

> I also read about conspiracy theories, the New World Order, Illuminati as they're called […] Something like this probably exists because there are people who have a lot of money. Money doesn't matter anymore, money is something, phh, what remains is power […] the most important are money and power […] They'd like to somehow be *the rulers of the planet*.

In Andrei's elaborate explanation, the conspiratorial plot of 'money and power' extended to operate on a global stage where countries like Romania or even the UK had little say on the matter. The lure of money instead stretched across nation-state borders to connect those who earned the most. However, the power wielded by the so-called 'rulers of the planet' did not stop at money. Andrei explained how the main plot of this global elite revolved around eradicating difference. In his words, the pandemic acted as a step on the way 'to be, all of us, under the same currency, the same language, the same religion and to work for the big guys who are looking after themselves'. When it came to business, he explained that the economic collapse caused by the pandemic intended to destroy small

businesses and entrepreneurs, in an effort to clear the path for large corporations. As to eradicating difference, the main example in Andrei's eyes was the European Union where an entire continent was united under one institution, one currency and one language.

Despite the strong values knotted in this conspiratorial plot, Andrei explained that it was unlikely to ever impact his livelihood. When I asked what the main threat was for him personally in this conspiratorial plot, he explained in a defeated voice that his work was unlikely to be impacted by such grand changes. Instead, the spark that might lead to a revolution would be a change in religion:

Andrei: No, I don't think these things will happen very soon. Until now, I worked on a lousy salary and if it happens, it will be the same. *I will work on a lousy salary for others.* […]

The only change would be religion, then there would be a revolution.

Ana-Maria: What religion in particular would that be?

Andrei: I don't even know myself, but the Muslims evolved a lot, the *other* religions evolved a lot in a few years. Versus other religions dating back to many years, it became the second religion after Christianity, it evolved very much. […] Because it grew a lot, in Europe for example and it started spreading a lot. […] It's no longer just over there in Asia or Africa. At least, here in London and England, it evolved a lot. There's lot of houses of worship here, places for *them* to pray.

Ana-Maria: Is religion important to you?

Andrei: *That's the only thing I wouldn't ever give up.*

Ana-Maria: Do you go to church often in London?

Andrei: It's more about faith, I don't go to church a lot or to go everyday, I can say I carry God with me all the time, *I was born this way.* […] I was always the same, I even went to Church more when I was in Romania […] It's about what's in your heart […] Priests and money, the elites of the Romanian [Orthodox] church, I saw what kind of cars they're driving around in […] golden clothes and all sorts of crazy things, why do they drive around in a [Mercedes] *S Classe*, can't they drive around in a [Volkswagen] Passat or a [Dacia] Logan?

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Rather than threatening his livelihood, the conspiracy to eradicate difference would only impact Andrei's life if it changed his religion. Andrei explained that the main threat of eradicating difference comes from Europe's newest internal Muslim other (Silverstein, 2005) which he described in terms of their otherness and unfamiliarity. Exposed to the multicultural character of London, Andrei expressed concern at the number of mosques as 'places for *them* to pray'. At the opposite pole, Andrei explained that his faith did not rely on regularly attending one of the many Orthodox churches in London. Rather,

faith was embodied and manifested everyday by him 'carrying God with me all the time'. Andrei did not define his faith in terms of practice or institution, expressing the oft-heard complaints in the Romanian community about the excessive riches of the Romanian Orthodox Church where high-ranking priests dress in gold-threaded robes and drive around in luxury cars. Rather, Andrei described religion as something linked to his identity: 'I was born this way'.

At first glance, revisiting my conversations with Andrei seems to lead down a rabbit hole, with enough topics and leaps to make one's head spin, from the alleged money-earning scheme behind COVID-19 vaccines to the gold-clad, Mercedes-driving priests of the Romanian Orthodox Church. As much as they are difficult to detangle, these narratives hide a lot under the seemingly messy conceptual patchwork of conspiratorial thoughts, fears, and views of the future. Andrei's statement shows how COVID-19 mobilised and further activated an existing political subjectivity manifested through conspiratorial thinking. Rooted in mistrust, this facet of conspiratorial thinking starts off as an act of resistance to the practices of global capitalism. On the one hand, Andrei is a supporter of global capitalism *par excellence*, by remaining mobile in his search of work and engaging in the (aspirational) consumerism of luxury goods such as his luxury German-made car. During his employment history, Andrei moved from low-paid job to low-paid job following the demands of the labour market (such as working in the construction industry where there remains a need for cheap workers in the aftermath of Brexit) and the new inflections of the economy (becoming a part of the gig economy through Uber). However, Andrei cannot be considered a mere dupe of capitalism. In our conversation, he refuted the lure of money and power and the would-be 'rulers of the planet', which he then put into action by refusing the COVID-19 vaccine and disregarding the severity of the pandemic. However, he also remained critical of his own role within global capitalism as working 'lousy jobs for others'. This builds on the previous sections covering the 'politics of resentment', showing how Andrei remained aware that his livelihood is so far removed from the practices of decision makers which he referred to as the would-be 'rulers of the planet'.

Nevertheless, Andrei's reflections of the 'politics of resentment' go beyond mere reflections on money and power. What is also interesting about his vernacular political claims is their link to ethnicity, racialisation, and the politics of difference. In his explanation, the conspiratorial plot of money and power did not stop at financial gains but had a secret aim of 'eradicating difference' to foster global sameness. While he remained defeated about the impact of this global ploy of sameness on his livelihood, Andrei drew the line at religion. He carefully separated these marks of religious and ethnic difference from his own religious and ethno-national identity as Romanian *and* Orthodox. Mistrust mobilised within this expression of identity as well, since Andrei spoke against the Orthodox Church as an institution, one with a significant record of corrupt practices. He instead described religion as something innate and inalienable, linked not to the practising marks of Orthodoxy such as going to church, but to one's birth and own being. Mobilising racialised notions of ethnic and religious difference through Islamophobic tropes, he spoke against the perceived 'Muslim other' who he saw as dominating

religious identity in Europe. Racialised expressions of dissent about such visible 'others' are not uncommon in the literature on Romanian and Eastern European migrants in the UK, with other studies documenting racist behaviour and slurs towards people of colour (Humphris, 2018; Nowicka, 2018; Fox and Mogilnicka, 2019). While unpacking these statements could easily make the subject of another entire chapter, what remains interesting here is the quickness with which conspiratorial thinking turned from a means of enacting agency to a discourse of prejudice and religious nationalism. Among other things I unpack below, this fear of the 'other' nestled within conspiratorial narratives was quickly turned into electoral success for a far-right party during my fieldwork.

The electoral activation of the 'politics of resentment'

The conspiratorial narratives presented in this chapter were also at the root of an emergent electoral trend for my participants. To return to the 'politics of resentment', Mihăilescu (2018) explained that culture becomes a banner under which various resentments are rallied. Yet, this is a culture that is 'ours, of the people' (Mihăilescu, 2018:173, my translation) which exists in antithesis to anything foreign perceived to be tainting it. As a result, politics becomes more attuned to the people: 'Politics is, finally, truly and wholly, *of us* and *for us*.' (Mihăilescu, 2018:173, my translation, original emphasis). It was not long until a political party capitalised on the vernacular political claims like those in this chapter, further activated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At a time of Mihăilescu's writing about 'the politics of resentment' in 2018, Romania was led by the Social Democrat Party (Partidul Social Democrat – PSD), a (supposedly) left-wing, well-established political party whose leader at the time was Liviu 'Daddy' Dragnea, an infamous Teleorman-born politician later jailed for corruption. If PSD could rely on the electoral activation of the *Teleor men* in 2018, they needed to share their electorate with a new political party in the Romanian Parliamentary elections of December 2020. The newly formed right-wing, *anti-sistem* 'Alliance for the Union of Romanians' (AUR) scored 9% of votes in Romania, and nearly 25% of votes abroad (Code for Romania, 2020). The result was astounding for a party formed merely a year previously. The support shown by migrant voters was even more surprising, considering that the *diaspora* generally tipped the scales in favour of anti-corruption and pro-European candidates.

This electoral result becomes less of a surprise upon closer inspection of the party's manifesto where the 'politics of resentment' take a clearer shape. The 2020 manifesto made grand proclamations about 'the people' and 'sovereignty', in emphatic but simple language. It described how the party's ideology was based on four pillars: the family – defined by marriage between a man and a woman; the motherland – defined by the Romanian language, Christian faith, and (white) ethnicity; faith – described as 'the Church, tradition, and nation'; and freedom – to express oneself and not be censored (all my translation). It refuted an elitist approach, and instead deferred to the needs and wants of 'the people' or 'our brothers'. In the months to follow since my conversation with Ileana, these values were tightly woven into anti-COVID-19 and anti-vaccine rhetoric and protests. Just a few weeks before Romania

experienced the third and most tragic wave of COVID-19 in November 2021, AUR politicians and their supporters gathered in city squares in the hundreds protesting the 'sanitary dictatorship' (*dictatura sanitară*). Investigative journalists traced the rise of George Simion, AUR's political leader, showing how the party used social media to attract the attention of Romanians with videos decrying foreign investment, corruption, and pandemic restrictions (Recorder, 2020).

Among the different narratives about the vaccine, Ileana mentioned voting for AUR in the 2020 elections because she had seen them reciting a prayer on Facebook as part of a gathering for Romania's national day on 1ˢᵗ of December 2020, which at the time was illegal according to pandemic restrictions. When I asked her why she trusted this new party, she quickly corrected me and explained that she merely 'gave them a chance'. After all, she was not interested in politics, she explained. However, she voted regularly, was up to date with all kinds of political scandals in Romania and recounted politically intricate conspiracy theories. Elena's attitude towards politics and her support for AUR were not alone among the Romanians I met. Many of them referred to AUR videos they had seen online or revelled in the spectacle of some AUR politicians refusing to wear a mask in the Romanian Parliament. Despite Ileana's claimed apolitical status, her support for AUR showed how the 'politics of resentment' were quickly and strategically activated by a new, extremist political party. Hidden under statements about the COVID-19 vaccine and lockdowns, AUR laid the groundworks for the electoral mobilisation of this new political subjectivity. And much like the boundary controlling described by Brown and Theodossopoulos (2003), the 'politics of resentment' carefully distinguishes between 'us' and 'them' to lay the groundworks for a society where the 'other' – whether gay parents, atheists, or the Roma – is folded back into a conservative, all-white, Orthodox society. The result is Romania taking a large step on the road to illiberalism, as described by Mihăilescu (2018). It is for anthropologists to carefully interrogate and unpack this step, before resentment morphs into an outright and majoritarian politics of hate.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the conspiratorial narratives about the COVID-19 vaccine expressed by some Romanians in London. Using Carey's (2017) concept of the 'bureaucratic imagination', I showed how these conspiratorial narratives assumed a bureaucratic form to express scepticism not simply about the virus or the vaccine, but about bureaucracy and state authority more broadly. This scepticism was rooted in an emergent 'politics of resentment' (Mihăilescu, 2018) where the desire for political agency coincided with frustration about the failed promises of life in Romania and, in the case of my participants, of life in the UK. These failed promises led to many of my participants yearning towards a 'plot of land to live off', a collective nostalgia for a desirable life defined by rurality and the supposed freedom this rural milieu affords. This rural image had a significant hold on the imaginations of

Romanians in London, rooted in the historical and political significance of land and rurality in (postsocialist) Romania more broadly. However, these concerns were not only connected to my participants' experiences in Romania. Conspiratorial thinking about the vaccine also drew on their experiences of diversity and perceived difference from the 'other' in the UK. Illustrated in Andrei's narratives about the vaccine, conspiratorial thinking effectively combined 'othering' tropes based on religious difference with vernacular political claims about the ills of capitalism and state authority. This process of 'othering' did not emerge in isolation, but instead manifested in the electoral success of a new far-right party, AUR, in the Romanian Parliamentary elections of 2020. While the votes of my participants would previously have gone to liberal candidates, they suddenly turned to support a new, *anti-sistem* political party that fought for the religious and national identity echoed in their conspiratorial narratives about COVID-19.

While COVID-19 took centre stage in this chapter as the subject of conspiratorial narratives, I would like to end with an illustration of how conspiratorial thinking did more than provide an outlet for discontent during the pandemic. Instead, it showed the vernacular political attitudes already present in Romanians' lives. The COVID-19 pandemic simply provided a focal point for my participants to express a wider political subjectivity, one coinciding with the rise of far-right movements in present-day Eastern Europe, illustrated by their support for AUR. A vivid example of the continuity and durability of conspiratorial thinking occurred about six months after I had moved out of my host family's house. In the spring of 2022, I briefly returned to London and took the opportunity to catch up with Camelia and we took the children to the playground. While the children played on the swing sets, I chatted to Camelia about current affairs, out of which Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine loomed large. Camelia's extended family lived in Moldova, an Eastern province in Romania bordering the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. I had heard from other participants that many of their families were concerned after spotting military planes flying above their houses.

Camelia, however, mentioned no such concerns. She instead downplayed the scale of the invasion, claiming that the footage shown on television was taken from video-games rather than active conflict zones. She in turn stated that Romanians must worry about their own country first, rather than hosting 'supposedly Ukrainian refugees'. I was surprised to hear Camelia repeat these narratives given her religious devotion and the fact that she had recently given money to her church's donation appeal for Ukraine merely a month ago. However, these narratives were not new. Similar statements featured extensively on Facebook and right-wing online news or TV sites paid for or voiced by AUR politicians (Expert Forum, 2023), many of which introduced doubts about Romania's support for Ukraine, for example by debating the mistreatment of Romanian minorities in Ukrainian territories. After all, Camelia wondered, Ukraine had little reason to join the EU. She then asked rhetorically: 'What has Romania got out of being in the EU anyway?' Before I could interject, Camelia's daughter beckoned to show us a trick she learned in her gymnastics class. As we watched the little girl, I pondered on Camelia's dissatisfaction with the EU. What had the EU done for people like her? I resisted pointing

out that Romania's membership in the EU facilitated the mobility on which Camelia and her entire family relied for their livelihoods. In the space of six months, these conspiratorial narratives about the war in Ukraine had suddenly replaced those relating to COVID-19, and I was curious about what other current events they would turn to next.

Conclusion

My most recent visit to the Boian household fell on the rainy day of Good Friday in May 2024.[38] I had arranged with Camelia to drop by the house that afternoon so that we could surprise the children during the school pick-up. I arrived at the familiar front door and rang the door bell but received no reply. After knocking vigorously, I decided to go to the back gate located near the kitchen window. As soon as I turned the corner, I sensed the rich smell of *sarmale* (see Figure 13). Camelia smiled at the kitchen window and opened the back gate so that I could join her inside the kitchen. She had already cooked a large batch of *sarmale* in an electric pressure cooker, destined for the midnight Easter service. On the hob, another large pot of *sarmale* boiled slowly, the source of the delicious smell. This batch was intended for the Boians and their current housemates, an elderly woman from their church who slept in the children's room and two men who worked in construction. The elderly woman was very religious and good-hearted, Camelia explained, but unlucky with finding work so they agreed to let her sleep in the children's room for a meagre rent. The worktop near the stove was covered in even more pickled cabbage leaves and a large plastic bowl of minced meat mix. I turned up my sleeves and joined Camelia in rolling the remaining *sarmale*. This third pot, she explained, was meant for the guests – family members, friends, godparents, godchildren, or even Marcel's customers – who would likely visit the Boians during the holidays and ask after Camelia's renowned *sarmale*.

I hadn't seen Camelia for almost a year and it had been a challenging one. Her brother-in-law who was in his forties passed away unexpectedly and the family rallied to support her sister. As best she could from afar, Camelia cared for her sister by sending her money and ensuring that family members went to see her regularly. We spoke at length about the challenges of being abroad at such times, and I shared the news of my uncle who unexpectedly passed away recently. Camelia reflected on the difficulties of her having 'my own dead [people]' now, whereas years ago she only mourned 'my mother's dead [people]', hinting at the different strengths of kinship relatedness as one grows older. This change had a significant impact on Camelia's health, who was under investigation after suffering from heart palpitations. However, not all things were bad, Camelia explained, and she eagerly took me into the living room. A couple of new entries appeared on the wall that usually displayed a collection of printed canvas photos from the Boians' lives. Camelia proudly explained that she and Marcel were godparents to another baby boy, pointing to a photo of the entire family dressed in traditional clothing where Camelia held a little blue bundle in her arms. Another canvas showed a photo from the christening party, for which the Boians traded their traditional clothes for elegant outfits. It was Camelia's 'wish' (*dorință)* to baptise another baby this summer, since this meant enlarging their family and doing a good deed in God's eyes.

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[38] Romanian Orthodox Christians celebrated Easter on the 5th of May in 2024, while Catholic and Anglian Christians celebrated on the 31st of March.

Camelia suddenly exclaimed that we were late and needed to go pick up the children. I jumped in the car with her and we were soon standing at the school gates. Unlike during my fieldwork, all three of the Boian children currently attended the same Catholic school, which Camelia valued for the convenience and the religious values the school taught. As we walked through the gates, Camelia greeted many other Romanian women and children who hurried away, probably rushing to their own boiling pots of *sarmale* that awaited at home. We picked up Anastasia, Sebi and Magdalena and walked them back to the car. Camelia dutifully explained to the children that they needed to go to church on the way home for a Good Friday ritual that involved walking under the Holy *Epitaf*, a large embroidery of Christ being laid to rest. When Sebi asked why they were celebrating Easter late, Camelia patiently explained that 'we' celebrate now because we are Romanian, different from the Easter they celebrated in school a few weeks ago. I joined the Boians at church and then returned home where I gave the children gifts and helped Camelia prepare some food for them. I looked after Sebi and Magdalena for a short time while Camelia dropped off Anastasia to one of her extra-curricular activities, as the girl had become an adept gymnast, swimmer and singer. After Camelia returned, she and the children gave me a lift to the nearest Underground station and they returned home to prepare for the church service happening that evening.

Figure 13: Preparing sarmale. *Since I did not take any pictures of the* sarmale *I prepared with Camelia on Good Friday, I chose this picture of the* sarmale *I prepared with my mother a week later in Romania for my uncle's memorial service.*

***

My recent visit to the Boians provides an apt concluding vignette for this thesis. As well as offering an update on the Boians' lives, the scene above shows the continuities of the social processes I set out to explore in my research. The numerous batches of *sarmale* prepared by Camelia heed the warning with which this thesis started: 'You'll see, many people come and go in this house!' The pots of *sarmale* helpfully illustrate the wide and diverse web of relationships in the Boians' lives – family members, housemates, friends, godparents and godchildren, extended kin, as well as acquaintances from church and from Marcel's business. Echoing the processes described in Chapter 2, Camelia's gendered labour and identity were central to preserving these relationships, as she worked hard to prepare the food necessary to remake these relationships through commensality during the Easter holidays. Camelia also played an important role in creating new relationships, for example by using her 'wish' (*dorința*) to be godmother again in order to expand the Boians' kinship network. As explored in Chapter 3, kinship and the obligations to care for family shaped Camelia's life, unfolding transnationally. As we exchanged stories about bereavement, Camelia reflected on the challenges of honouring kinship duties abroad, in particular about how to best care for her grieving sister in Romania. Outside of her kinship obligations, Camelia also continued to care for other Romanians in the scene above, showing a continuation of the 'duty to help' I unpacked in Chapter 4. The elderly woman they allowed to sleep in the children's room poses a good example. Since she went to their church and was therefore trustworthy, the Boians agreed to help her with a place to stay for cheap as she struggled to find work.

Outside of the relationships present in the scene above, the value norms underpinning the Boians' lives show some continuities as well. Intent on giving her children a better life, Camelia still took Anastatia to a range of extra-curricular activities. She also continued to expose the children to Christian Orthodox values by taking them to church after school for the Good Friday ritual and choosing a Catholic school for them. These Christian values were not simply religious for the Boians and for my interlocutors. As I explored in Chapter 6, they were intertwined with their Romanian identity, as Camelia explained to the children that 'we' as Romanians celebrated Easter that weekend. Ideas of Romanianness were key to the topics explored in this thesis, from which I start below in my summary of my intended contributions.

Thinking through and beyond the Romanian case

One of the main contributions of this thesis is to the Romanian and regional ethnographic literature. Throughout the chapters in this thesis, I followed the emic concept of Romanianness with which my participants grappled everyday. I approached it as 'a perspective on the world, not a thing in the world' (Brubaker *et al.*, 2006:169) and traced its gendered and classed manifestations. For the Romanian women like Camelia whose story I started with in Chapter 2, Romanianness could not be separated from the gendered norms and practices in their lives, such as being caring or dutiful. In terms of class,

Romanianness was made through everyday acts of helping and being helped by one's compatriots to become and remain economically active, rather than through high-brow celebrations of Romanian art or folklore (such as those I encountered at the Romanian Embassy during my Master's project, see Introduction). However, what stood out the most in my ethnography about Romanianness was that it was both celebrated and discounted by my participants. Romanianness simultaneously meant ingenuity and reciprocity, as well as deception and self-interest. While many of my participants commended ingenuity and resourcefulness as Romanians' 'gifts from God' as Camelia phrased it (see Introduction), most participants also warned me against trusting our co-nationals who they often referred to as *țepari* ('conmen')*,* to borrow Manu's turn of phrase (see Chapter 4).

The concept of favours, and its established regional literature in postsocialist Eurasia, proved central to understanding this paradox. Rather than a mere hang-up of (post)socialism, the exchange of favours held the key to understanding my participants' experiences of Westward mobility. From an ethnographic point of view, favours were necessary to make ends meet in London. An established network of family, friends and acquaintances (*cunoștințe*) helped my participants find accommodation, get work, and build relationships of kinship and friendship. Lacking any *cunoștințe* in London could even endanger one's life, as illustrated in the story told by Ovidiu about the Romanian man who walked back from Stansted Airport after being robbed *en route* to London (see Chapter 4). Despite and perhaps because of the importance of these connections, a set of contested 'ordinary ethics' (Lambek, 2011) emerged in my participants' narratives and practices of the 'duty to help' other Romanians. The 'duty to help' encompassed a range of practices from bureaucratic help to housework, as illustrated by the *buletin* and the bed under the stairs in Amalia and Ovidiu's house (see Chapter 4). The need to help other Romanians also enlisted a particular kind of reciprocity, or as Manu simply put it 'help them because you were also helped'. However, the 'duty to help' expanded beyond mere reciprocity or ethnic solidarity to incorporate norms of deservingness that sometimes reproduced the state's categories of belonging, such as economic activity or making a contribution to society, or what Amalia simply called 'letting them eat for themselves'.

The process of helping and being helped by other Romanians was underscored by a pervasive mistrust, with my participants' often feeling 'taken advantage of' by other Romanians (see the claims made by Camelia's brother in Chapter 3 or the experiences of Amalia and Manu in Chapter 4). Cautionary tales about *țepari* thrived among my participants, such as Andrei's betrayal by a friend who used his identity to avoid paying traffic fines and nearly cost him his driver's licence and livelihood (see Chapter 4). In everyday stories and cautionary tales alike, Romanianness was celebrated as both a source of support and help, *and* of self-interest and deception. A contested set of moral norms was employed to manage this polarity. While these moral norms mainly operated in personal relationships between Romanians, they also expanded into the realm of charities and community associations. As I show for the Romanian-run foodbank where I volunteered for five months (Chapter 5), the strategic use of favours and bureaucracy allowed a small, precariously funded organisation to make a significant

difference in the lives of Romanians facing hunger, unemployment and destitution during the COVID-19 pandemic. The practices at the foodbank amounted to 'vernacular humanitarianism' (Brković, 2017a, 2023) as staff and volunteers did not simply rely on universal humanitarian values, but drew on their own experiences of mobility and the moral norms underpinning the provision of help among Romanians more widely. The foodbank's culturally intimate service provision turned favours into acts of resistance by valorising the kinds of mobility and labour discounted by the British state, such as poorly-paid gendered work in the case of Doamna Doina (see Chapter 5).

By tracing the tensions of Romanianness, this thesis hopes to amount to more than a regional contribution. Instead, the insights I gained through my ethnography could be applied to think beyond the Romanian case in two significant ways:

Firstly, the tensions behind honouring one's obligations towards other Romanians provide useful insights into the morality and moral economy of migration, an area of growing academic interest into migrants as moral actors (Ciubrinskas *et al.*, forthcoming). Faced with changing dynamics in their 'home' countries and restrictive policies in countries of destination, migrants must engage in complex judgements situated in multiple moral orders occurring within, and at times against, ever-changing migration regimes. For example, as I explored in Chapter 2, norms about gender, duty and care impacted how the Romanian women I met behaved in their roles as mothers, sisters, daughters, or wives that required navigating gendered hierarchies of belonging in both Romania and the UK. This process of negotiation sometimes enlisted creative ways of resistance, like when Camelia and other Romanian women successfully used their identities as young, 'settled' migrants to access student financial aid.

However, I also argued that reckoning with moral norms such as duty should not be romanticised as mere ethnic solidarity or reciprocity. I showed how these processes may rely on inherent tensions whose exploration can be generative for anthropologists and migration scholars interested in morality and moral economy. The prevalent mistrust among Romanians proved illuminating in this respect, as it did not simply signal the existence of broken ethnic ties. Instead, mistrust emerged as a generative social phenomenon for my participants and contributed to crafting themselves into particular kinds of social and moral persons. As Radu Umbreș recently wrote about distrust in a Romanian village: 'When we understand the causal mechanisms that make people not trust others, distrust appears not as the evil counterpart of trust but as its reasonable alternative' (2022:15). For my participants, mistrust shaped social relationships of friendship and kinship and revealed their complex moral underpinnings, as the Romanians I met struggled to balance their material interests, their hopes for their mobility, their duty to help kin and compatriots, and their ideas about who remained (un)deserving of help. Born out of their lives in a postsocialist country and their hyper-mobile experiences across Europe, these norms could be applied to a wider understanding of moral economy for migrants. It was tracing my participants' moral judgements and not taking the presence of mistrust at face value, but recognising its generative social potential, that informed my approach in this thesis. This approach holds conceptual and epistemological contributions to wider discussions of the morality and moral economy of migration.

The second contribution developed in this thesis stems from another generative side of mistrust, related to its political affordances. Besides shaping the relationships between Romanians, mistrust also emphasised the political values underpinning their mobility. For example, my participants employed the figure of *țepari* (conmen) to reproduce norms of deservingness among other Romanians – in terms of economic activity, contribution to society, and a lack of criminality or welfare abuse (see Chapter 4). As Jelena Tošić and Andreas Steinzer recently argued, deservingness has become a 'crucial category of contemporary politics' (2022:1) within which migration plays a significant role as destination states devise increasingly complicated policy to differentiate between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' migrants. Rather than only being subjected to these processes, my participants also played an active part in them as they created norms of vernacular deservingness along the lines of gender (Chapter 2), kinship (Chapter 3), Romanianness (Chapter 4) and the politics of difference (Chapter 6).

Mistrust was also important to understanding my participants' approach to state authority and power (whether in Romania or in the UK). Bureaucracy played a key role in unpacking my participants' relationships with the state, impacting not only bureaucratic documents and infrastructures but also the relationships and norms surrounding them. As I explored in Chapter 6, mistrust in the state took a remarkably bureaucratic form – rooted in what Carey (2017) has previously called 'the bureaucratic imagination' – when my participants tried to make sense of COVID-19 restrictions and the vaccine. The resulting conspiracies employed a decidedly bureaucratic language and infrastructure, with some Romanians prophesising that the COVID-19 vaccine would bring the end of the world as we know it. Within these apocalyptic statements, mistrust towards state processes and figures of authority and power contributed to a more widely-applicable political attitude I called conspiratorial thinking. Conspiratorial thinking applied not only to COVID-19, but also to the manifold inequalities my participants encountered due to their place within global capitalism, 'working in a lousy job for others' as Andrei succinctly phrased it (see Chapter 6), and their experiences of the politics of difference. Their conspiratorial thinking emphasised a kind of deservingness key to neonationalist movements in present-day Europe that, borrowing from Don Kalb:

> seeks to enact and/or re-enact an imagined "rightful" social hierarchy that is seen as threatened or effectively stolen, a hierarchy expressed in claims towards deservingness domestically as well as internationally (2022:103).

It is this understanding of the 'imagined "rightful" social hierarchy' that I aimed to contribute to the literature on migrants' vernacular political views. Stemming from and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, these political attitudes represent a potential next step for the research started in this thesis. I briefly discuss the impact of the pandemic next, before exploring some potential future directions for this research.

Pandemic constraints and opportunities

The main constraint of this ethnography is derived from its unfolding during the COVID-19 pandemic, both from a methodological and empirical perspective. Covering nearly half of my fieldwork, lockdown restrictions meant I relied on a small and highly localised participant pool, with most of my ethnographic observations occurring within the Boians' household. This context required a partial change in focus from the topics I had set out to explore, as ethnographic research often does. As I explained in Chapter 2, while I had planned to understand processes of work and labour, I eventually gained a deeper understanding of social reproduction and gendered work than of paid work outside of the home. These findings echo the extensive writing of feminist anthropologists (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Rubin, 1975; Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995) and proponents of Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017) who have disproved a clear boundary between the private and domestic realms in both economic activity and social life as a whole. Nevertheless, my insight into work was severely impacted by the fact that I could not accompany my participants to work.

Despite its constraints, I endeavoured to turn the circumstances of the pandemic into a strength of this thesis by focusing on the minutiae of life within the Boian household, especially in Chapters 2 and 3. As the thesis progressed, I mirrored the openness I experienced during my fieldwork when restrictions eased, opening up the worlds of my interlocutors beyond the threshold of the Boians' house. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 therefore aimed to draw a broader picture of my participants' lives in London, taking the reader into the homes of other Romanians, a Romanian-run foodbank and a complex matrix of conspiracies bridging not only different spaces, but also different temporalities. The empirical context of the pandemic shone brightest in these later chapters, as patterns of mobility and work were unsettled by COVID-19, for example through unemployment or illness, requiring some Romanians to rely on their co-nationals' 'duty to help' (Chapter 4) or the support of community associations (Chapter 5). In reflecting on these chapters, however, I conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be simply understood as a constraint on the empirical phenomena I sought to understand. As other anthropologists writing about moments of 'crisis' have attested, such junctions seldom mark a clean break with the past or entirely novel social, economic or political phenomena, whether in terms of the 2008 financial crash (Narotzky and Besnier, 2014; Roitman, 2014), the 2010 Greek crisis (Knight, 2013; Theodossopoulos, 2013; Rakopoulos, 2014) or the so-called 2015 'migration crisis' (Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris, 2016; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018).

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic showed several continuities in my ethnography, especially the continued interdependence present in my participants' lives. As Keir Martin, Ståle Wig, and Sylvia Yanagisako wrote in 2021, COVID-19 showed the interdependence at the heart of our societies, launching fervent debates about how some dependencies were morally evaluated since 'debates about dependence always entail debates about control and obligation' (2021:2). For the Romanians I worked

with in London, as for many other people across the world, COVID-19 came with a reminder that their networks of family members and friends were a key constituent to their well-being and the lives they sought to build. Although it might sound trite, many Romanians had been used to some uncomfortable aspects of the pandemic due to their mobile lives, such as constraints on their mobility due to border restrictions or the pangs of being away from loved ones and needing to sustain relationships via video-calls. One key difference for my participants was the fact that they needed to call on their social ties to make ends meet during the pandemic, often because their lives were discounted by pandemic governance. For example, Camelia stored large supermarket bags in the boot of her car when dropping off her children for illicit playdates at other Romanians' houses in case she was stopped by police (see Chapter 2). These playdates allowed Camelia to juggle her multiple responsibilities during the pandemic, as a mother, wife, daughter, sister, student, and worker. As Laura Bear and colleagues observed early in the pandemic, COVID-19 restrictions caused a 'kinwork and care deficit' (2020:4) since the provision of care outside of the household was strictly outlawed. For those Romanians without as many contacts as Camelia, this care deficit significantly augmented the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. For Doamna Doina, whose story I outlined in Chapter 5, pandemic restrictions on mobility and economic measures taken by employers meant that she was out of work for over a year. Volunteering at a Romanian-run foodbank where service provision employed the culturally-intimate language of favours helped Doamna Doina make ends meet and rebuild her life. Through a blend of favours and bureaucracy, the foodbank valorised the types of labour and mobility discounted by the British state both during and before the pandemic, such as gendered and domestic labour and working without *acte* ('papers').

While pointing out significant continuities in my participants' lives, the COVID-19 context also shone a light onto some new and unexpected processes. As I explained in Chapter 6, the Romanian Parliamentary elections of December 2020 brought to the fore a new far-right party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), who secured electoral and ideological support from many of my participants. The *diaspora*'s electoral support was surprising at first, since Romanians abroad often tilted the scale towards pro-European, liberal candidates. By paying attention to the political views of my participants, mainly voiced through conspiracies about COVID-19, their electoral support for AUR became less surprising. As I explained in Chapter 6, most of my participants employed conspiratorial thinking in their encounters with authority and the state, as well as a deep discontent about their place within global capitalism. I argued that COVID-19 represented only one window for this discontent, and that it continues to impact and animate the political views and debates of Romanians in London. This line of argument in turn proves interesting for future directions for this research.

Future directions

Figure 14: AUR electoral posters in my hometown in Romania for the European Parliament elections. The caption reads 'Defender of the Romanian motherland in Europe.'

One potential future avenue for this research revolves around the political views of Romanians abroad, focusing on their support for AUR and any other new far-right parties that may appear. Romania faces a quadruple electoral year in 2024, with local and European Parliament elections on 9 June 2024 and Romanian Parliamentary and presidential elections in the autumn (see Figure 14). These four types of elections will coincide for the first time since Romania's EU accession, providing an opportune insight into the European scepticism of the electorate in Romania and Eastern Europe more broadly. The quadruple elections will push most political parties to mobilise their electorate, especially their diasporic voters. AUR is no exception in these processes, as the party hopes to once again rely on the electoral support of the *diaspora*. In their 2020 manifesto, Romanians abroad were earmarked as a significant part the country that AUR vowed to protect:

> There is only one Romania, and its main definition is the people, language, culture, tradition, and shared historical past. Thus, while living in Rome, London, Cernăuți, Chișinău, Chilia, Madrid, Ialoveni, Timoc, Bruxelles, New York or Tiraspol, we are all Romania (AUR, 2020, my translation).

On the party's website as of May 2024, one of the main campaigns called the 'Green Line' (*Linia Verde*) is dedicated solely to Romanians abroad and promises to help them access consular services. This fertile electoral year represents a suitable next step for the research in this thesis, contributing to the growing anthropological literature on neonationalism in Europe (Buzalka, 2021; Szombati, 2018; Kalb, 2022). A potential ethnographic avenue for this research would be to focus on the religious congregations of Romanians in London where prophesies of an alternative future emerged

during the COVID-19 pandemic. The prophesising priests provided a key figure of political authority for migrants, albeit one routinely overlooked by academic study focused more prominently on formal party politics. My ethnographic insights from the pandemic highlight the political importance of these figures and their power to shape both the religious and political views of large numbers of Romanian believers.

Another future direction for the research started in this thesis revolves around the idea of England being 'the last hope' for many Romanians, to borrow Marcel's eponymic phrase from Chapter 1. Over the last four decades, countless Romanians have used intra-European mobility with hopes of prosperity and stability, as well as progress and Europeanisation. Throughout this thesis, I aimed to show how some of these latter hopes were coming undone for the Romanians I met in London. Some of my participants looked towards a promising future in the imagined homeland with the 'plot of land to live off' and started to question the value of Europeanness, for example by critiquing the project of the European Union (see Chapter 6). Voting for AUR may be only one symptom of this discontent. These narratives and hopes point to another potential and more speculative research trajectory. Where are Romanians likely to place their hope in the future? Will Westward mobility still occupy their imaginary of success? Will many Romanians return home and find yet another contested facet of Romanianness as they try to adjust to life in the country? Or will they turn to something else altogether? A quote from the late Vintilă Mihăilescu's work seems fitting to bring this thesis to a close and capture these speculative futures:

> Overall, the disenchantment in the world seems to be increasingly compensated for by returning to the 'small narratives' of everyday life. None of these [narratives] is hegemonic anymore, but each proposes to make sense of one sliver of reality […] But what is, or will be, the new Story, the new 'grand narrative' that will reunite us around a (somewhat) shared purpose […] Maybe this is the great *dilemma of the future*. (2018:203-204, my translation, emphasis in original).

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