

Stereotypes, “integration” policies and multiple identities: From a mapping attempt to the experience of some Romanian Roma families in Milan

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Abstract

“Dichiarazione dello stato di emergenza in relazione agli insediamenti di comunità nomadi nel territorio delle regioni Campania, Lazio e Lombardia”, “Strategia Nazionale di inclusione dei Rom, dei Sinti e dei Caminanti 2012-2020”, “Progetto Rom, Sinti e Caminanti” (Municipality of Milan), are examples of Italian national or local policies or practices that create and reproduce specific categories in which a multitude of persons, stories, origins, situations are subsumed, according to a supposed ethno-cultural similarity. Based on a categorical approach and on a deep-rooted anti-gypsyism, these policies could risk homogenizing, essentializing and making “gypsy” the identity of different people, separating them from the rest of the population.

The paper deals with men and women, Romanian citizens, in majority Roma, migrated to Italy during the last ten-twelve years and mainly settled in makeshift camps on the northern outskirts of Milan. Immediately categorized as *Roma* or as *Nomads*, they are identified as a “social problem”, “marginal subjects”, needing the implementation of particular “integration” policies. It seems that to categorize these people as Roma or as Nomads could allow to avoid to wonder about political, economical and social causes of the existence of unauthorized settlements, and could allow not to consider these families’ mobility within the broader migratory movements from Romania.

Considering the experiences of the last four years of ethnographic research and the first results of the European Research Project *MigRom - The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: causes, effects and future engagement strategies*, especially the attempt to map the presences of Romanian Roma in Italy, the paper aims to show flexible subjectivities, multiple and variable belongings, and people able to resist, through everyday life practices, to strict categorizations and to the violence produced by them. On one hand there are policies of “inclusion” that risk to create and exacerbate conflicts and discrimination, but on the other hand there are people able to resist moving inside these networks of power and among their different identities, in Italy and in Romania, in relation with *gagé* or with other Roma, bringing into question the so-called “Roma question” which has acquired new strength and an even greater weight at a political and media level, particularly since the arrival of Romanian migrants.

Keywords: Romanian Roma migrants, Anti-Gypsyism, local policies, multiple identities, makeshift settlements

Who are the “Rom and Sinti”? Who are the “Romanian Roma”? Different histories, origins, experiences gathered under one single category in the attempt to manage and govern presences perceived as thorny and dangerous. Rom and Sinti are subject to *ad hoc* policies and to “integration” projects at a national level and increasingly more at a European level (Sigona 2009). They are seen as a marginal minority towards whom specific “inclusion” plans need to be addressed. Such plans and policies nurture the idea of Rom and Sinti as a distinct and separate group from the rest of the population

and actually they tend to increase discrimination, conflicts and competition, avoiding to wonder about the structural causes of marginality and vulnerability. In this paper, on the one hand, I take my stand on an attempt to map the presences of Roma individuals migrated to Italy from Romania, conducted within the European Research Project *MigRom - The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: causes, effects, and future engagement strategies*¹. On the other hand, I refer to stories collected and experiences lived with the families originating from the Romanian villages of Grădină and Balta-Olt, respectively Dolj and Olt Districts,² South-western Romania, over a period of nearly four years in some makeshift settlements on the outskirts of Milan. My aim is to tell about mobile subjectivities, flexible belongings, variable according to contexts and situations, about persons who, as they move among their different identities, are able to resist the strict categorizations and the violence that they entail, and about migrants with personal and multiple backgrounds, wishes, aspirations, and expectations.

Mapping attempts

Between the beginning of April 2013 and the end of January 2014³, within the Research Project *MigRom - The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: causes, effects, and future engagement strategies*, we attempted to map the presences of Roma coming to Italy from Romania. As the first step of the Project, we decided to try to draw a numerical estimate of the presences of Romanian Roma in Italy, before deciding on which groups to focus our attention and in which context to concentrate the ethnographic research. Although well-aware of the problems that such a census could cause⁴, we thought that such an “experiment” could reveal us important information from many points of view, starting with the constant numerical overestimation of presences and Rom and Sinti identification and categorization

¹ The research leading to these results comes from *MigRom - The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: causes, effects, and future engagement strategies*, “Dealing with diversity and cohesion: the case of the Roma in the European Union”, a project funded by the European Union under the 7th Framework Programme (Grant Agreement 319901). The research is carried out by the University of Manchester (UK) (that also provide the coordination of the project), the University of Granada (Spain), the *Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme* of Paris (France), the University of Verona (Italy), the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities of Cluj-Napoca (Romania), the European Roma and Traveller Forum, the Manchester City Council (UK). The research team of the University of Verona is coordinated by Prof. Leonardo Piasere. For more information about the project see <http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/migrom/>.

² The name of the Romanian villages are pseudonyms.

³ Data collection was carried out by Stefania Pontrandolfo, Eva Rizzin, Sabrina Tosi Cambini and myself. Data are updated to 31 January 2014.

⁴ We all remember the problematic “ethnic census” carried out during the “Italy’s Nomad State of Emergency”,

http://www.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/sezioni/sala_stampa/notizie/2100_500_ministro/0771_2008_07_10_tre_falsita.html; for a critical analysis of this kind of census, see Piasere 2012 and generally concerning the risks of “ethnic statistics”, see Appadurai 2012.

methods, created and implemented through specific management and “inclusion” policies. Furthermore, we thought it would be useful and interesting to try to get an idea of the presences and different housing, working and social situations concerning Romanian migrants all over Italy. The hope is to be able to contribute, at last minimally, to the bringing into question of and further regard for the so-called “Roma question” which has acquired new strength and an even greater weight at a political and media level, particularly since the arrival of Romanian migrants⁵. Since the beginning of the 2000s and especially following Romania’s entry into the European Union in 2007, and after several reports of crime, Romanian and Romanian Roma migrants have become a constant news item in newspapers and newscasts, new scapegoat, security threat, the greatest sign of danger. There have been several attempts to restrict their freedom of movement, even since Romania’s entry into the European Union, and to repatriate them⁶. Many people have spoken of invasion, envisaging the danger of mass arrivals, and so attempting to give a more or less realistic estimate of the presences may also prove useful in demolishing, or at least in putting into perspective these emergency declarations.

The aim is to report and to show the extreme complexity of Rom and Sinti presences and, in the hope of being able to create a more complete and heterogeneous framework and to contribute to dispelling such collective imagination according to which Roma want to live in camps, caravans, shacks, tents and crumbling buildings, we immediately decided not to focus our attention only on the presences of Romanian Roma in formal and informal camps, but, where possible, to collect information also about other common situations within the territory, like families who have rented or bought private dwellings, and families hosted in temporary reception centres or involved in self-building projects.

As Martin Olivera writes «Within the actual climate of national security tensions, where Gypsies represent the most undesirable migrants par excellence [...], it seems urgent to make the nuanced points of views and analysis produced by researchers heard, in order to better deconstruct the univocal scheme that establish these populations as a “public problem” to be deal with» (Olivera 2010 b, 131).

⁵ An important upsurge in Roma criminalization in Italy had already occurred during the first 1990s, with the increase of migrations from the Balkans, Piasere 2012.

⁶ Decree Law no. 181/2007, «Disposizioni urgenti in materia di allontanamento dal territorio nazionale per esigenze di pubblica sicurezza» and no. 249/2007, «Misure urgenti in materia di espulsioni e di allontanamenti per terrorismo e per motivi imperativi di pubblica sicurezza». After non-conversion into Law of both the Decrees, Legislative Decree no. 3/2008 «Modifiche e integrazioni al decreto legislativo 6 febbraio 2007, n. 30, recante attuazione della direttiva 2004/38/CE relativa al diritto dei cittadini dell’Unione e loro familiari di circolare e di soggiornare liberamente nel territorio degli Stati membri» was introduced. About the attempts to restrict the freedom of movement and to repatriate Romanian citizens, see for example Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Romania/Rom-tra-liberta-di-movimento-e-rimpatri-38747> and <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Tutte-le-notizie/Io-romano-tu-romeno-egli-rom-39425>.

Data collection

Data collection⁷ was carried out on a municipal, provincial and regional scale, by contacting local administrations, in particular social services and Help Desks for foreigners, law enforcement agencies, prefect's offices, foundations (e.g. *Fondazione Migrantes*), charities (e.g. *Caritas Diocesana*), voluntary associations and NGOs which have contacts with families migrated from Romania. The contacts were taken above all by phone and by email, sending a brief presentation of the Research Project *MigRom - The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: causes, effects, and future engagement strategies*. We went to some cities and had personal meetings with local authorities, members of the local police, volunteers and social sector operators. We received documents such as projects specifically for Rom and Sinti, censuses on the Roma population, reports and researches carried out at a local level.

A particularly relevant issue emerged from the beginning. On the one hand, in a lot of municipalities it is the Police that has accurate information available about Roma presences, especially the local police or its specific operational squads that monitor and evict the unauthorised settlements and conduct censuses on their inhabitants. On the other hand, in many cases, it is individual people who are more aware of the different situations and living conditions since they either have direct contact with the families through an institution or association or for personal interest. We have also received important data from *Caritas Diocesane* and other organizations that provide free services such as refectory, showers, surgery, listening centres.

Within this mapping attempt, several factors contribute to making the data partial and incomplete, regarding numbers, origins, arrival dates and general conditions. In some cases we were not able to obtain satisfactory answers from the organisations we contacted, sometimes because they themselves did not have the data concerning the presences of Romanian Roma or they preferred not to provide them, and in some areas the information was particularly fragmentary. In several cases the information we were given, or that we found, was not up-to-date and referred to data collected during past researches and projects, or in situations of particularly high presences or evictions. In others cases, however, the information was extremely precise, as for example in Tuscany, where the *Osservatorio sulla condizione socio-abitativa dei Rom e Sinti in Toscana* (created by the Tuscany Region and the *Fondazione Giovanni Michelucci*) collects data on presences, housing conditions, arrival periods and Roma family origin areas since 1995⁸.

One more thing to highlight, is the fact that also the families we got to know for about four years provided us with important information. They told us about the presence of relatives, friends and compatriots in others Italian cities and provinces

⁷ A similar research was carried out in 2001 by Lorenzo Monasta, with regard to foreign Roma settlements in Italy, Monasta 2004.

⁸ Fondazione Giovanni Michelucci, <http://www.michelucci.it/> - Osservatorio rom e sinti, Regione Toscana <http://www.michelucci.it/pagine/romgis/> (consulted until 28 March 2014).

and about the temporary movements from one Region to another, in search of work and earning opportunities. This source was particularly valuable both because it often helped us to pinpoint situations that were otherwise barely visible or to confirm their existence, and because it provided us with relevant information on the origins, arrivals, housing and working situations, bonds and relationships within families settled in different Italian towns.

Some data

On the bases of the data collected during these ten months, we can count the presence of at least 20,000 Romanian Roma citizens who are living, more or less permanently, all over Italy. It is undoubtedly an underestimated number, due to all the reasons highlighted in the previous paragraphs. We hypothesize that the Romanian Roma presence in Italy could even be double comparing to the ascertained one.

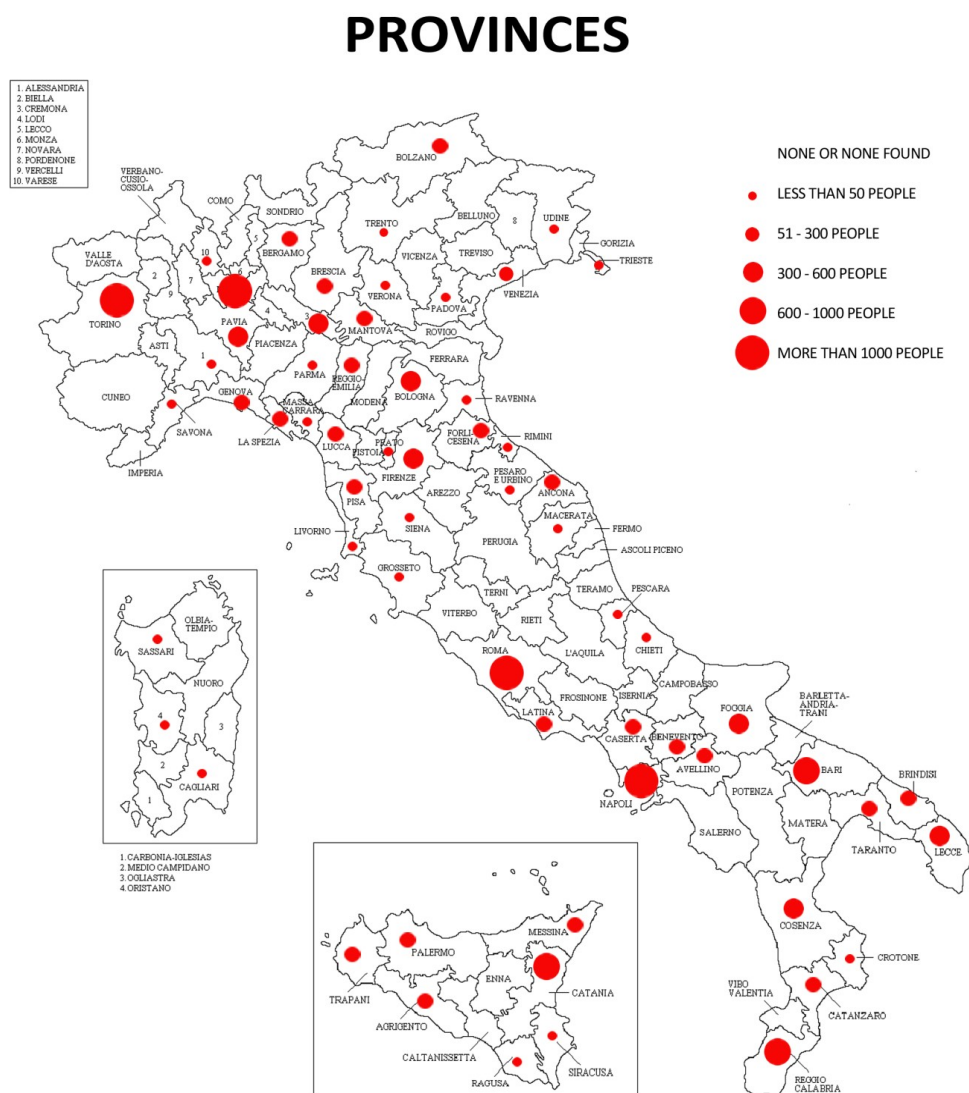
We find the highest concentration, at least 8000-8500 Romanian Roma, in the Northern Italian Regions. Of the almost 2500 individuals settled in Piedmont, about 2000 are living in unauthorised but tolerated makeshift camps in Turin. Lombardy is the Region with the largest presence: almost 5000-5500 individuals, of whom 3000 live in Milan and the remainder lodge in the Provinces of Bergamo, Brescia, Cremona and Pavia. The people settled in the various Provinces of Lombardy, mostly originating from the historical Region of Oltenia, South-western Romania, are often linked by family relationships, friendships and neighbourhood connections, and therefore visits and displacements, especially for wedding and baptism celebrations, at Christmas and at Easter, are frequent. There are varied housing situations: part of the families live in unauthorised settlements, others in temporary reception centres and others in private or rented houses.

There are about 3500-4000 Romanian Roma in Central Italy. Approximately 700-750 individuals live in Tuscany, of whom 300 are in Florence and the rest in the others Provinces. In Emilia Romagna there are about 700 individuals, of whom 400 live in Bologna. The highest presence is concentrated in Lazio, which counts at least 2000 Romanian Roma, almost all in Rome and the surrounding province. They live either in equipped areas or reception centres, as well as in some small makeshift camps, and the majority have migrated from the historical Region of Oltenia, South-western Romania.

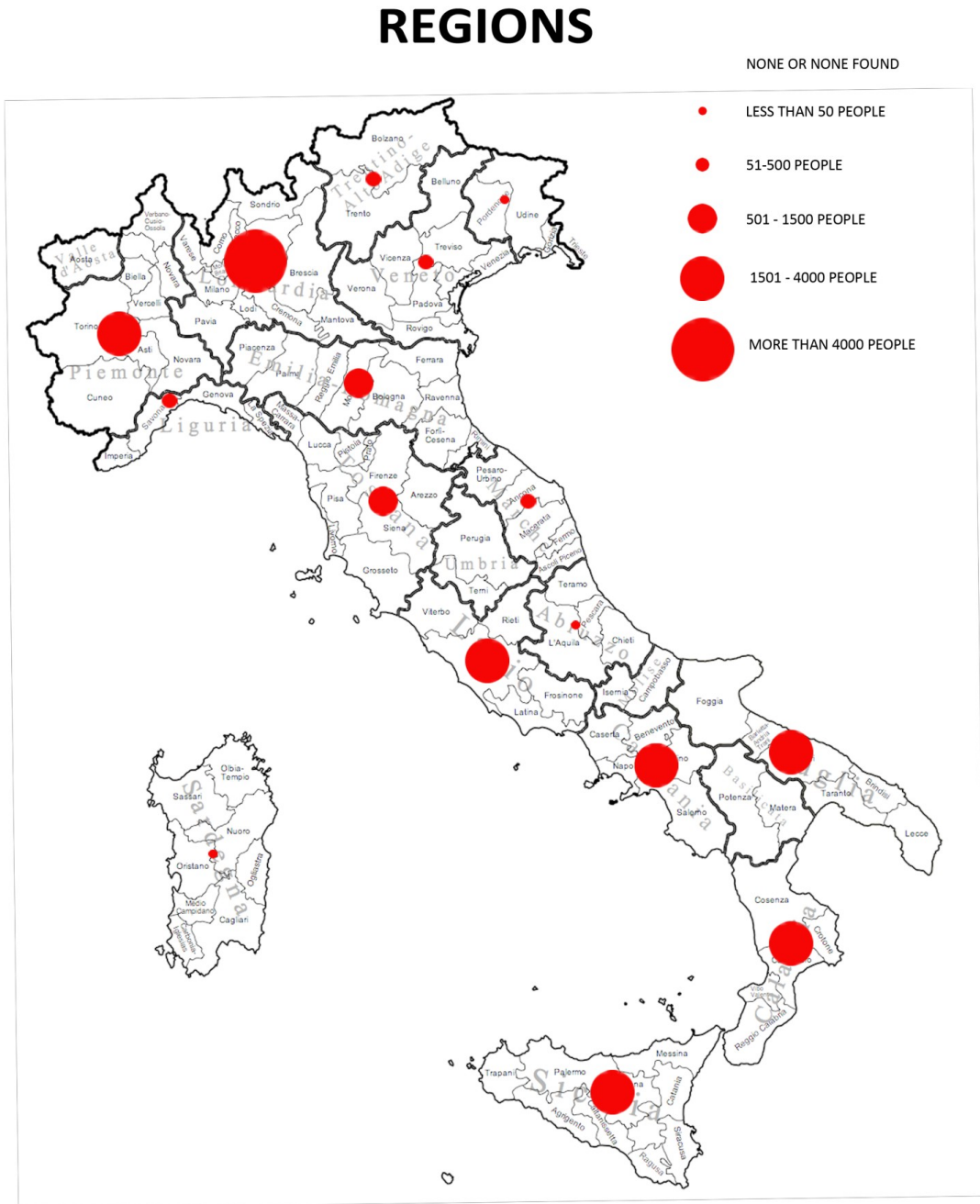
In Southern Italy we can hypothesize a presence of almost 5500-6000 Romanian Roma. We found at least 1500 people in Calabria: around 450 individuals live in Cosenza and around 700 individuals reside in Reggio Calabria and the surrounding province. As for Campania, we can estimate a presence of almost 2500 individuals, of whom nearly 2000 live in Naples, in unauthorized settlements and in the *Grazia Deledda* reception centre. Most of them originate from the historical Region of Muntenia, South-eastern Romania. There are at least 1500 Romanian Roma migrants in Puglia and of these about 600 individuals live in Bari, in an authorised camp and in many makeshift settlements. The majority come from the

historical Region of Oltenia, South-western Romania. In Sicily there are almost 1500 individuals, of whom about 700 have settled in Catania.

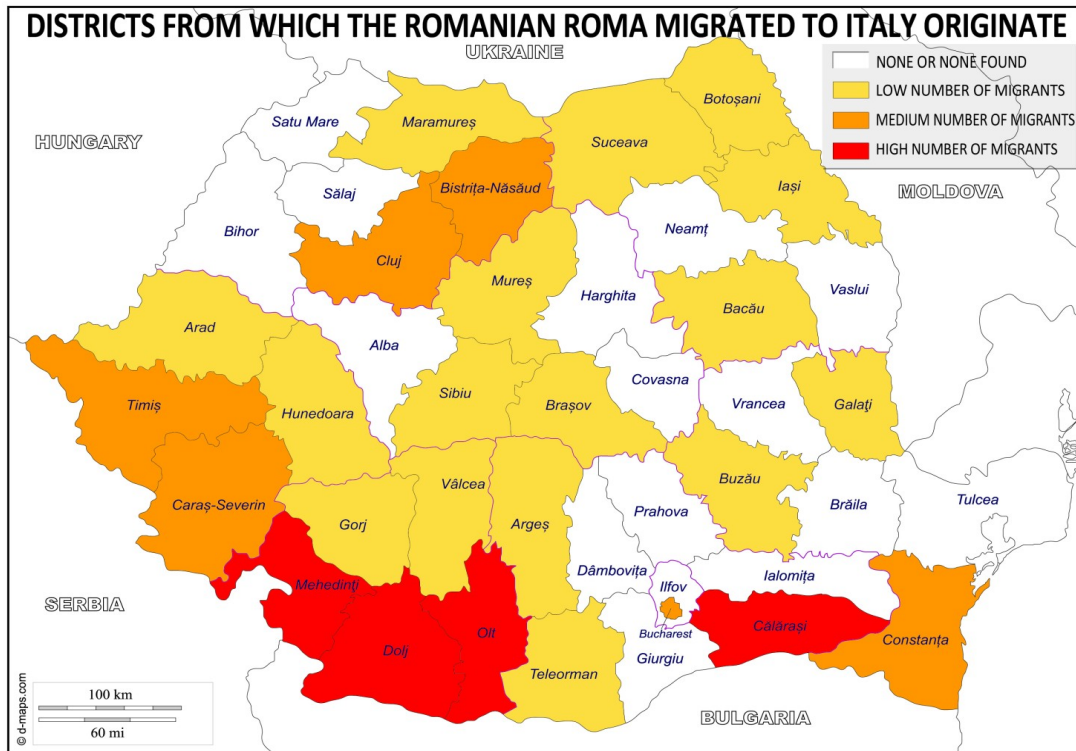
Map 1. Presence of Romanian Roma in Italian Provinces



Map 2. Presence of Romanian Roma in Italian Regions



Map 3. Districts from which the Romanian Roma migrated to Italy originate



Source: Agoni, M., Jovanovic, S., Piasere, L., Pontrandolfo, S., Rizzin, E., Tomescu, D., March 2014, “Report on the Pilot Survey”, *MigRom - The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: causes, effects, and future engagement strategies*, University of Verona, p.4-6.

Who are Rom and Sinti? Anti-Gypsyism and “integration” policies

In the process of this mapping work, we came up against many difficulties and factors that entailed a rather considerable and significant level of uncertainty.

On the one hand, we found ourselves faced with some “practical” difficulties. First of all, as reported in many sources, but it is important to repeat it, there are, and probably never will be, any certain data about the presence of Rom and Sinti in Italy, as well as in the most part of the European countries. We can only refer to more or less precise estimates: for example the Council of Europe estimates a presence of

about 11 million Rom and Sinti in all of Europe, with Italy having between 110,000 and 180,000 individuals, an average of 140,000 people⁹. This depends on several reasons. It depends on the “camouflage strategies” which Rom and Sinti carry out, aware of the still widespread and deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes, as well as on the fact that often it is simply not necessary to declare being or not being Roma (do any of us introduce ourselves by listing our multiple identities and belongings?). It depends on the fact that in some documents and censuses, Rom and Sinti are exclusively registered as citizens of their countries of origin, while in others cases, everyone who is living in formal and informal settlements are indiscriminately identified as Roma or declare themselves to be Roma in order to access the projects addressed to Rom and Sinti. With regard to the families settled in an unauthorised camp in Turin, Carlotta Saletti Salza writes «for the institutions, those living on the river are all Romanian Roma, “gypsies” or “nomads”. In any case, they are “Roma”» (Saletti Salza 2009, 115). Then, it is important to add that a part of those who migrated from ex-Yugoslavia in the 1960s and ’70s, as well as in the 1990s, arrived in Italy without documents or have only no more valid passports and are stateless, or they have no residency permit and are “illegal immigrants” (Senato della Repubblica 2011). Lastly, whereas there are any authorised “nomad camps” or large formal or informal settlements, or particularly sizeable and visible situations, whereas families live in council flats or rented houses, collecting information about the presence of Roma people can be really arduous and problematic, also for the families themselves, who could be labelled against their will.

On the other hand, in the middle of all this, it emerges strongly the question of identity, or rather, of identification and classification, and so of “recognition” and “inclusion” policies which actually re-propose and strengthen the idea that there is a specific category, in which a multitude of persons with very various stories, origins and situations are subsumed (Olivera 2011, Piasere 2012 and Pontrandolfo 2014). Indeed, although it is well-known that the definition of “Rom and Sinti” encompasses a myriad of different situations and that defined “cultural features”, like language and religion, which allow to certainly identify the members of this minority, do not exist, actually Rom and Sinti continue to be subsumed under one single entity on the basis of an assumed innate and a-historic ethno-cultural similarity, homogenizing, essentializing and labelling them as Roma or Gypsy or Nomad. Categorized as “Roma”, they are automatically seen as a “social problem”, “marginal subjects”, needing the implementation of specific management policies and “social integration” projects, at a national level (for example *National Strategy for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Communities*¹⁰) as well as at European level (for example *Decade of Roma inclusion 2005-2015*¹¹) (Olivera 2011). «Ministries and politicians seek out the difference, and their discourses range from a racist approach to an

⁹ Council of Europe, Roma and Travellers, http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/default_en.asp and <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/source/documents/xls> (consulted until 28 April 2014).

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_italy_strategy_en.pdf.

¹¹ <http://www.romadecade.org/>.

ambiguous one where the difference arises in the exact same moment in which they decide to work towards abolishing it» (Piasere 2012, 142).

Even when they are officially citizens of a country, Rom and Sinti continue to be perceived as foreigners, aliens, outlawed presences. «The gypsies that live in the various European states, Italy included, in the great majority are formally official citizens of these countries. Only the large on-going East to West migrations are now reshuffling the cards. But, juridical tradition, local and personal cultures still join forces to make them foreigners. [...] If the gypsy/nomad is considered like a foreigner, what happens to the gypsies actually, that is juridically, foreigners? [...] If the gypsy is a “normal” foreigner, then the two attributes double up and the foreign gypsies are considered as the maximum of “foreignness”» (Piasere 2012, 58-59). Therefore, also the mobility of Rom and Sinti is not conceived within the wider migratory movements which involve Italy and Europe. «The analysis of their international mobility is generally disconnected from that of the other European migratory movements. [...] Today Roma mobility, like those of yesterday, however, proves to be inseparable from the broader populations’ movements that concern all Eastern and Balkan European societies» (Olivera 2009, 182-183). In the Italian collective imagination, Rom and Sinti mobility (real or imagined) is often linked to the idea that they are nomads, ignoring the fact that almost 80% of European Roma are sedentary, and that Romanian Roma in particular were progressively sedentarised through centuries of slavery and then through assimilation policies during the Ceaușescu regime (Achim 2004). Identifying Roma people as nomads legitimizes the creation of “nomad camps” as well as the conception of policies like “Nomad State of Emergency”¹² (Piasere 2012). Especially since the ’80s, the so-called “nomad camps”, formal settlements designed, established and equipped with basic facilities by local administrations, have become the standard housing solution offered to Rom and Sinti in Italy¹³, and the identification of nomadism as a characteristic cultural trait of all Roma groups has been, and still is, employed to justify and legitimize segregation policies. Behind the rhetoric of a housing solution compatible with “Roma culture” and aimed at their “social integration”, there is the will to enclose in a delimited and controlled space what is perceived as a destabilizing and dangerous otherness. “Nomad camps”, ghettos built on the city outskirts, have made Rom and Sinti even more visible in a negative sense and have contributed to increasing exclusion and marginalization¹⁴.

It is true that identifying Rom and Sinti as one single great community can lead to greater visibility and to the possibility of recognition and resources. It is also

¹² *Dichiarazione dello stato di emergenza in relazione agli insediamenti di comunità nomadi nel territorio delle regioni Campania, Lazio e Lombardia*, http://www.governo.it/Governo/Provvedimenti/testo_int.asp?d=39105

¹³ Especially following the adoption of the ’80s and ’90s regional laws for the “Protection of Nomadic People”.

¹⁴ In 2000 the European Roma Rights Centre drew up a report entitled *Campland. Racial Segregation of Roma in Italy*, denouncing the segregation policies implemented towards Roma and Sinti, the violence exerted by police, the marginalisation and the conditions of extreme degradation of many formal and informal camps, see ERRC 2000 and ERRC 2013 a.

true that, beyond differences and conflicts, there is a «Romaní dimension» (Piasere 2006), a certain degree of auto-identification and reciprocal recognition. But a categorical approach risks confirming the existence of a “Roma population” characterized by an irreducible diversity, separating it from the rest of the citizens, and thus reinforcing the idea that Rom, Sinti, Travellers, Gitanos and Mānuš form an “ethnic minority” on a global scale for whom specific interventions are necessary, regardless of their historical, political, economical and social differences, and the conditions, aspirations and interests of each community.

Martin Olivera writes, «Roma are thus seen as a *population*, i.e. a set of families and individuals who have common characteristics and, therefore, bring the same problems to the institutions. [...] the classification of the Roma, and even more of the migrant Roma, into an homogeneous and problematic category has deep roots on which different actors, at local, national and European level, have fed [...]. All competing in terms of the methods and responses that should be addressed to the “Roma question”, the various speakers agree on what seems to be obvious: the European Roma constitute a problematic minority that needs to be dealt with» (Olivera 2009, 182).

Rom and Sinti often share the same problems and difficulties as their fellow citizens, certainly exacerbated by a higher level of discrimination, exclusion and stigmatization. But this fact is not considered since they are constantly seen exclusively as a distinct community, a marginalised minority who generate specific problems and need particular intervention plans. It is exactly this continuously manipulated and exaggerated idea that contributes to perpetuate prejudices and stereotypes, as well as to bolster social, economical, political conflicts and competition. In fact, «‘Difference’ is used to explain Roma impoverishment, social tension and conflicts, migration and the failure of ‘integration’ initiatives. It conserves the political isolation of ‘Roma’ people and supports the ideology of segregation. [...] This construction of an ethnic political agenda and institutions not only obscures the common interests of Roma people and their fellow citizens, but places them in competition with each other. Money spent on Roma is quite simply money not spent on ‘non Roma’» (Kovats 2003, 2-3).

Anti-gypsyism, as a specific racist ideology, have historically played, and still plays, an essential role in the construction and conservation of such a uniform and stereotyped concept of Rom and Sinti groups. The dehumanisation (Nicolae 2006) and mass criminalization (Piasere 2012) of Rom and Sinti are the pillars of anti-gypsyism as a «Complex social phenomenon which manifests itself through violence, hate speech, exploitation and discrimination [...] as well as social aggression and socio-economic exclusion» (Nicolae 2006, 1). In fact, «From the moment in which they are labelled as gypsies, from the moment in which they are recognised, identified, perceived and named as such, they find themselves to be categorised with a *series of outrageous practices* by those who consider themselves different: gypsies and anti-gypsyism go together because [...] it is the anti-gypsyist that creates the gypsy» (Piasere 2012, 167-168). In the current situation, anti-gypsyism determines and, at the same time, is determined not only by the adoption of measures aimed at

facing and resolving the “Roma problem”, and at managing and eradicating their presence, but also by specific policies for the protection of the “Roma minority” and by “social inclusion and integration” projects.

Of course, within and alongside these power dynamics, it is very important to remember how «single rom, sinti, etc. communities have often been able to respond and invent strategies and tactics of containment, reply, resistance, resilience and assimilation against the gypsy-labelling process they find themselves subject to, a variety of strategies and tactics, some winning and some losing, are often played down in order to avoid harder abuse» (Piasere 2012, 171). Resistance tactics and strategies that people enact, more or less consciously, through their daily life practices.

Going back to the mapping attitude, these reflections on identities, categories and policies help us to understand why, when we specifically asked about the presences of Romanian Roma, the information we were given did not always concern Romanian citizens, but rather families living in Italy for decades or even centuries. In some cases, we received information concerning Roma families with Italian citizenship, demonstrating how strong the idea of these persons as foreigners is. In other cases, people told us about «nomad caravans» or about people coming from Bosnia, Montenegro, Kosovo, completely neglecting the different historical and political reasons behind their migrations. Furthermore, as already mentioned, some people who either are not, or who would not define themselves as, Roma, but who share the same housing spaces, are often included in the same category. In our case, as in other (Saletti Salza 2009), these people are mainly Romanian citizens, usually fellow citizens, neighbours and friends of the Roma families, who lean on them during their own migration process. Mainly in unauthorised settlements, the presences are various. There are Italian citizens, people coming from other European countries or from Northern and Sub-Saharan African countries, “illegal migrants” and asylum seekers, who have no possibility of settling elsewhere.

Lastly, the topic of anti-gypsyism and the strict categorization of Rom and Sinti as “problematic and marginal subjects”, can help us to contextualize the fact that an educational approach, which considers Roma as subjects needing to be re-educated, often continues to prevail, especially within many social service organizations and charitable associations. Children do not attend school, people do not wash themselves, mothers are unable to look after their children and exploit them for begging, men do not work, wives are made to submit to their husbands and they are vulnerable persons who need to be emancipated. During our search for information on Romanian Roma presences, we often had to hear extremely disparaging and discriminatory comments, which show still deep-rooted generalizations and prejudices. Suspicions about how the Roma communities earn their livings continue to be very strong and are almost always thought as outlawed and illegal activities. Some spoke of women who prostitute themselves, other about the fear that a mother would return to Romania in order to sell her son. Many times evictions and forced expulsions, which leave families with no place to spend the night, are seen as successful policies. Too often there is no willingness to recognize

them as persons with subjectivity and agency, as men and women with multiple identities, projects, aspirations and expectations, as mothers and fathers who dream of giving their children a better life and who have migrated, leaving their homes and families behind, in order to make that dream come true.

As is known, the category of Rom and Sinti, far from representing a homogeneous entity, includes a myriad of groups with different histories, origins, languages, religions, housing, social and economic conditions, legal situations, aspirations and future prospects. They represent a *mondo di mondi* (world of worlds) (Piasere 1999). So the only possibility is self-identification and self-declaration by means of one's own flexible belongings and multiple identities, including Roma's one. Moreover, despite the claims of many Roma organizations about the existence of a single and separate Roma community at a supranational level, which needs its own specific delegation, not even the fact of being collectively perceived, defined and discriminated as Roma is enough to create a sense of collective belonging and identity, and «The “Roma question” omnipresence on the public scene [...] has increased their will to distance themselves from those that the mainstream society perceives as their “ethnic brothers”» (Olivera 2010 b, 140). «The imagined community shares no common language, culture, religion, identity, history or even ethnicity. Even within countries, Roma minorities are diffuse and diverse and do not function as any kind of actual community» (Kovats 2003, 4).

Romanian Roma: who, how and where

As regards the presences of Roma groups migrated from Romania in particular, it is often more difficult to collect such specific data.

In Romania, where Roma are one of the twenty national minorities recognized by the Constitution, the estimates concerning these populations vary according to the source: the 2002 census reports 535,000 Roma, about 2.5% of the total population, and the 2011 census registers 619,000 individuals self-declared as Roma, around 3.2% of the total number of citizens (ERRC 2013 b), while unofficial sources and NGOs hypothesize a presence of about 2.5-3 million Roma, at least 10% of the Romanian population (Olivera 2010 a).

In Italy, on the one hand, as already highlighted, Rom and Sinti of different origins, with Italian or foreign citizenship, continue to be treated as absolute aliens and incorporated into one single great category. This process certainly does not spare Romanian Roma. Once identified as “Roma”, they are immediately categorized as subjects with specific problems, dangerous and destabilizing presences, avoiding to wonder about the political, economical and social causes of the existence of unauthorized settlements, neglecting to consider families' mobility within the broader migratory movements from Romania, and leaving aside «the social and cultural diversity of the groups, among the Romanian Roma themselves, and the variety of individual and family paths» (Olivera 2009, 188) . Since the early 2000s, Romanian migrants, especially those identified as “Roma”, have become a permanent topic in

political and media discourses, representing the category of migrants most difficult to integrate and control.

On the other hand, if in many cases all the inhabitants of makeshift settlements are censused as Roma or Romanian Roma, in other cases, in local administration documents or at charity association help desks, as well as in researches and surveys on migration in Italy, they are registered only as Romanian citizens. Furthermore, many of them declare themselves simply Romanian citizens, both due to the prejudices they know to exist towards Roma, in Italy as in Romania, and because belonging and identification levels are always multiple and changeable according to circumstances and contexts. As regards the Romanian case in particular, the identity borderlines between Romanian and Roma are not always certainly defined, but are sometimes rather indistinct, flexible and changeable in relation to historical, political and social events, because the identity, far from being a fixed and immovable entity, transmitted from one generation to another, is always a construction, a set of ever-moving elements. If, above all at dialogue and imagination levels, stereotypes continue to be very strong, in particularly those of Romanians towards Roma, and if both are aware of their existing differences, actually history, cultural features and daily life of many Romanian Roma are profoundly linked to those of the majority of the population with whom they have been living in close contact and sharing a territory for centuries, rather than being common to all the “Romanian Roma” (Olivera 2011). Indeed, if «some groups are similar due to historical and geographical proximity [...] these communities also resemble their neighbours [...] and often much more these than other Roma “ethnic brothers” living in distant regions» (Olivera 2010 b, 133). To confirm these connections, it is enough to think about the friendship and neighbourhood bonds, and the relationships between compatriots, that often prove essential for migration.

The large number of internal partitions and subgroups makes it impossible to talk about the existence of one single Roma community in Romania (Olivera 2010 a). The various Romanian Regions have experienced profoundly different historical and political events «and Roma communities have not been impervious to this past, which is also theirs» (Olivera 2010 b, 133). The effects of this historical, political and economical diversity, which still exist today, can be found in the several religious faiths, dialects, clothing, professional activities and socio-economic conditions, as well as in the various levels of social interaction and local integration. The numerous Roma communities in Romania are historically different according to the type of work, which they carried out either by living permanently in a given place or by moving seasonally from an area to another. We can find this partition in the countless self- and hetero-denominations of the different Roma groups (Achim 2004), even if nowadays there are many who do not explicitly identify with any particular ethnonym or who refer to it mainly in order to distinguish themselves from other Roma communities or to categorize other Roma groups. All this helps to understand and explain «the multitude of Romanian Roma communities, result of their centuries-old local integration» (Olivera 2010 a, 27) within a given territory. They frequently talk about the large number of *nație romilor*, “Roma nations”, that exist in Romania, from

which they see themselves as more or less distant. As already mentioned, a certain degree of reciprocal self-recognition and distance from *gagé* (non Roma people) exists, but actually a Roma group coming from the same area tends to present itself as having specific qualities and morals, and to differentiate itself from the Roma groups coming from other regions. Maria¹⁵, a woman who arrived in Milan from a little village near to Costanța, talks about the families coming from Dolj and Olt Districts, that I have known for almost four years, as dangerous people, inclined to commit theft and robberies. At the same time, within the families I often visit, those coming from Grădină employ the same stereotype towards the families from Balta-Olt, who in turn describe the *grădineani* as much rougher and dirtier, stating that they would never eat with them. In conversations people often specify their origin and identify themselves as inhabitants of one or of the other village, establishing difference and distance respectively from the *grădineani* or the *balteani*, even if actually marriages between people coming from the two villages are quite frequent and so kinship ties and social connections are numerous and complex. This sense of belonging or of strangeness can be materially observed in the families' arrangement within different settlements or in separate areas of the same camp (this kind of arrangement is also often linked to the network of kinship relationships and to issues concerning "shame" and "respect" rules). «So there is not one single way "of being Roma", and only external observers (scholars or not) attempt, yet again, to establish a unity, while the persons concerned do not cease to distinguish themselves one from the other and to experience their differences in the everyday life» (Olivera 2010 a, 29). So, according to Olivera «If, however, we would identify at all costs some Roma "cultural groups", characterised by a "specific identity", we should keep to a mapping of local communities: the Roma from a particular region, even from a certain series of villages, sharing a given style of clothing, a special way of Romanés speaking, a local history, etc» (Olivera 2010 b, 133-134).

There are several possibilities of personal, family and collective identification and distinction. People often identify themselves in reference to their local context, region and village of origin, or to their family and parental network, to the so-called *njamo*. The choice can change according to the situation and depending on the interlocutor, another Roma, a Romanian or an Italian. Alin was born to Romanian parents, but grew up in a Roma family. How does he identify himself? He says that he is different to the other Roma, because he has «Romanian pure blood», but he has grown up according to «Roma law». He is married to a Roma woman and so how do their children see and identify themselves? How do the so-called *țigani românizați*, as *rudari* or *tismănari*, categorize themselves? They do not speak the *romani* language, and are often identified as Romanian by the Roma and as *țigani* by the Romanian. At the same time, especially in some situations, the differences and separations are highly marked, as prejudices and stereotypes towards Roma populations are still deep-rooted in Romania. Alex, Ioana and Stefan's son, *tismănari*, has married a Romanian girl and her parents are not at all pleased about this union, because «he is a

¹⁵ All the names present in these pages are pseudonyms.

țigan!»). At the same time, Ioana does not want her daughters «to marry a *țigan* and spend their entire lives wearing long skirts and begging for money!»). Ioana, Stefan and their children have always lived in makeshift settlements together with Roma families from Grădină and Balta-Olt, because they relied on them when they first came to Italy. But one day, due to a dispute, someone told them to leave the abandoned factory in which they all lived together, because «you are Romanian, what are you doing here?». On some occasions, it is the Roma themselves who stress the differences in behaviour and lifestyle compared to the *gagé*, confronting themselves with them and highlighting, for example, the greater importance that Roma attribute to the group, to the *njamo*, to the family and children, to gender relationships, to the concept of shame, to hospitality, to mutual help and support, so that «a *gagiò* can live among a thousand Rom, but a Rom cannot survive among a thousand *gagé*», said Ovidio.

To conclude, «the external discourse aimed at homogenizing in order to better control [...], despite its persistence and the socio-economic power of those who manipulate it, is ineffective to undermine the intimate and daily experience: it remains theoretical and abstract, while collective belonging is an everyday occurrence» (Olivera 2010 b, 142). For the people concerned, the “Roma”, above all *amare Roma*, “our Roma”, are a limited group of persons linked by more or less direct kinship bonds, who know and interact with each other, the members of their *njamo*, or individuals from the same villages. It is a set of flexible boundaries, but people define their belonging within it, even as opposed to “other Roma”, to Romanians, to *gagé*. Belongings, distinctions and boundaries are continually and daily negotiated, modified and transformed within the communities, so that «the term “Roma” [...] does not refer to a generic affiliation but to the social experience» (Olivera 2010 b, 142).

To further complicate this mapping work, is the often extreme precariousness of many settlements, especially when unauthorized and constantly evicted, which obliges families to be constantly on the move, separate and find new living arrangements, always more hidden and unstable, to sleep in cars and vans or relocate to another city. Eviction, as a precise political course of action, is presented by Italian institutions on the one hand as a necessary operation for re-establishing public order and safety, and on the other hand as a practice in favour of Roma families living in a state of health and hygiene decay. But in actual fact, an eviction is always a violent action that involves the demolition of tents and shacks and the loss of all the belongings, including mattresses, blankets and clothes of people living in a makeshift settlement. It is an event which devastates the families’ daily lives, modifies their projects and above all leaves them with no place to spend the night. An eviction should always be announced and alternative accommodation should be offered to those evicted, but this often does not happen. People come back from begging or working and simply find everything gone. Italy has been condemned by European Institutions for the policies and the actions implemented towards Rom and Sinti, but in Milan, as well as in other cities, evictions have never stopped.

On 21 May 2008 the former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi signed the *Dichiarazione dello stato di emergenza in relazione agli insediamenti di comunità nomadi nel territorio delle regioni Campania, Lazio e Lombardia*, according to which the presence of “unauthorized settlements” represented an emergency equivalent to a natural disaster or a war. They are outlined as a threat to public order and safety. A threat that needs to be dealt with using special powers and measures, even by waiving specific laws on human rights protection¹⁶. “Italy’s Nomad State of Emergency” legitimized the intensification of repressive measures and brought a considerable increase in forced evictions in many Italian cities. Even if the “Nomad Emergency” was declared illegitimate and suspended between 2011 and 2013¹⁷, the hard line taken towards “makeshift and unauthorized settlements” is still the same and in most cases evictions occur without respecting national and international laws.

One of the most critical situations identified and pinpointed in the “Nomad Emergency” decree concerns the city of Milan, where there are 7 “authorised nomad camps” and 3 “unauthorised but tolerated nomad camps”, established or equipped by the local administration for Rom and Sinti families, both Italian and coming from ex-Yugoslavia countries, and numerous “unauthorized settlements” scattered throughout the periphery of the city and in the hinterland municipalities. Since 2012, the Municipality of Milan has developed and implemented the *Progetto Rom, Sinti e Caminanti*¹⁸, which provides the closure of some “authorised nomad camps”, the definitive dismantling of all “unauthorised settlements” and the construction of some temporary recovery centres for evicted families.

Despite the policy of forced evictions carried out by local administration, the families I frequent since four years, coming from different Dolj and Olt Districts’ municipalities, have been living in increasingly more hidden and unstable makeshift camps on the northern outskirts of Milan, in the districts of Bovisa, Villapizzone and Quarto Oggiaro, for more than ten years. During these years, informal settlements have become even more unstable and shacks have given way to tents and cars. In November 2010, when I became acquainted with the families and went into the camp under the Adriano Bacula overpass, on the northern outskirts of Milan, there were only a few tents pitched between the rails. Throughout the following months, as a consequence of a sequence of repeated evictions, the destruction of shelters and the loss of property including tents, mattresses and blankets, the camp disappeared during the day and reappeared only in the late afternoon, simply made up by a few tents to spend the night. Considering the almost daily police inspections, every morning men and women took down their tents and hid everything, only to pitch them again in the late afternoon. Those families who had enough money decided to buy a car or a van

¹⁶ Emergency Decrees authorize Prefects to waive specific Laws on human rights protection, including Law no. 241/1990, one of the only legal protections against forced eviction, see Amnesty International, 2011

¹⁷ <http://www.amnesty.it/corte-di-cassazione-conferma-illegittimita-emergenza-nomadi>

¹⁸ https://comune.milano.it/portale/wps/wcm/jsp/fibmcdm/FDWL.jsp?cdm_cid=com.ibm.workplace.wcm.apiWCM_Content/governo_sblocchi_fondi_piano_maroni/261696804be0eaada4fda728d42ade19/PUBLISHED&cdm_acid=com.ibm.workplace.wcm.api.WCM_Content/Linee%20guida%20%2052e8bb804be16003a760a728d42ade19/52e8bb804be16003a760a728d42ade19/PUBLISHED

in which to keep all their things and to spend the night, and therefore not be afraid of being banished at any moment.

Within the consequences of the continuous evictions, there is the crumbling away of the great aggregations, the dispersion and scattering of families among a lot of little camps, usually according to kinship and neighbourhood relationships, because «they are not the “Romanian Roma” who migrate, but different local communities [...] based on kinship relationships and a limited territory of origin» (Olivera 2009, 185). Even if an “informal settlement” may be perceived from the outside only as a place of disorder and marginalization, as a dangerous place that must be removed and eradicate, for the families living within the camp, despite the material and symbolic precariousness, and the harshness of living conditions, it is a place of sharing, of mutual help and support, which not only reproduces the same kind of sociability that they experience in Romania, but also the same “social rules and moral code”. They live with relatives, friends and fellow citizens, and they share the difficulties of migration, evictions and life in Italy. Mirabela cooks for all the family and they eat together, Mariana helps her daughters with their children, Anița shares the clothes and shoes that *gagé* give her with other girls, Florentina arranges a party for her daughter’s birthday, Marius lends money to his cousins or friends. Although conflicts and arguments are a common occurrence, the camp is the network which allows men and women to resist the daily difficulties of their existence in Italy and the violence of the policies brought against them. It is a kind of world within which they can be a man, a woman, a mother, a father, a wife, a brother, a sister-in-law, a Romanian citizen, a *grădinean* or a *baltean*, and not only «a Gypsy». It is sense of belonging and security, because, despite what we might think and imagine, the inhabitants see, feel and experience the camp as quite a safe place, while the real dangers are in, and come from, the outside world. Even if the time spent at the camp is often only short, it is home for its inhabitants and a familiar place where women arrange shacks, tents and vans, make them welcoming, keep them tidy and clean. When Yonuț calls his wife and asks her «*Kaj san?*» (where are you?), she answers «*Me sem po platz, sem khere!*» (I am at the camp, I am at home!). Moreover, almost all women and men beg, they have no employment contract and no residence permit in Milan, so the camp is not only the cheapest housing solutions, but also almost the only possibility of accommodation that these people have.

Urged by this increasingly more extreme precariousness, the result of the policies carried out for many years, a lot of families frequently move through different Italian cities and regions, but especially between Italy and Romania, where they have children, family and a house to finish building. A lot of men and women spend several months in Italy, returning to Romania only in some periods of the year, during the summer, for Easter and Christmas, or when the situation is unsustainable because of the evictions, coming back when the waters have settled or when money has run out. When possible, the migratory method adopted is that of family member alternation, so, in turn, they spend some periods in Italy and some in Romania, taking care of children, land and house, which cannot be left unattended. In fact, many, especially those people who live in makeshift settlements, continue to consider their

migration only as a temporary phase in their biography and to imagine their future life in Romania.

Another important element to take into account, linked to the matter of some families' high mobility, either due to force or as an economic strategy, is the fact that some of them move through several Italian regions, depending on work and earning opportunities. For example, during the summer months some people live in rented houses and work in the agricultural sector in the Province of Foggia, while, during the rest of the year they settle in unauthorised camps in Milan and beg for money. Or, again in the summer, some families settle in Emilia Romagna's tourist centres, other move along the Puglia and Basilicata beaches to sell tourists Chinese objects, and then spend the rest of the year between Romania and various Italian cities. During data collection, it is possible that these families were counted twice or more times or never.

There is a constant movement between Italy and Romania, as well as within different Italian regions and cities, and this makes it extremely difficult to define the effective presence of Romanian Roma in Italy. The people living in an informal settlement are continuously changing: one family goes to Romania while another arrives, a wife joins her husband in Milan and a mother returns to her children in Grădină. Moreover, in Italy the situation is constantly changing, especially in regard to unauthorised settlements and their inhabitants, and undoubtedly during these months some of the censed camps have been evicted or have disappeared, others have appeared or have expanded, others are undergoing a phase of progressive dismantling and inhabitants have been temporarily offered alternative housing arrangements.

Migration: Grădină and Balta-Olt - Milan

In regard to migration, a very important aspect to highlight is the fact that Romanian Roma family displacements are part of the much wider migratory dynamics from Romania especially towards Western European countries. Although some Romanian citizens were able or forced to leave the country already in the previous decades, the much broader migratory movements from Romania began immediately after the fall of the Ceaușescu regime in 1989, which led to a gradual re-opening of the borders on the one hand and caused the definitive closure of state enterprises and agricultural cooperatives on the other, which, in turn, led to the collapse of the entire national economy (Diminescu 2003).

In a first stage, between 1990 and 1994, exploiting the opportunity to enter the bordering countries as tourists, 30 million Romanian went to Hungary, Turkey and Ukraine in order to sell Romanian goods and buy local products to sell back at home. In the same years, more than 300,000 Romanian citizens claimed political asylum in Germany, Belgium, Austria and France. In nearly every case the claim was rejected. In a second stage, between 1994 and 2000, displacements were increasingly more directed towards France, Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal, where people could enter illegally or with a visa granted for the Schengen Area, hoping in a later regularization.

As of 1st January 2002, with the abolition of the visa regime for the Schengen Area countries, Romanian citizens acquired the right to a three-month stay as tourists, i.e. without the right to work. The entry of Romania and Bulgaria in the European Union on 1st January 2007, sanctioned the Romanian citizens' full freedom of movement, even if some countries maintained restrictions to labour market access until 1st January 2014. Since 2002, and even more so since 2007, departures and arrivals from Romania have considerably increased, fuelling the rhetoric of a Romanian Roma invasion. It is since then that the image of Romanian migrants as criminals and dangerous people began to be an ever present topic in political and media discourses. As regards Italy, although the first presences of migrants from Romania date back to the end of 1990s, in cities like Genoa, Milan and Bari, it is particularly since 2002 and even more since 2007 that the migratory flux has become more consistent. Today Romanian citizens are the most numerous migrants in Italy. They are more than one million and they are the most sizeable presences¹⁹ in many Regions and cities. As already specified, on the basis of the data collected, at least 20,000 could be Romanian Roma.

As for the families from Grădină and Balta-Olt, migration, in its multiple and variable forms, linked to historical, social, political and economic transformations, has played, and still plays a role of utmost importance from many points of view and also influences and determines identity dynamics. These families have been living in makeshift camps on the northern outskirts of Milan, in the districts of Bovisa, Villapizzone and Quarto Oggiaro, for more than ten years. The re-opening of the borders and the possibility to freely enter into the Schengen Area, together with the great economic crisis exploded after the regime collapse, urged many people to migrate towards other European countries. Many people who are now settled in Italy have also been in other countries, like Serbia, Germany, France, Spain, Greece, Portugal. A lot of them have relatives, friends and fellow citizens in other European countries and some talk about the possibility of migrating to Great Britain, France or Germany where they believe better living conditions, and the possibility of a job, can be found.

The migration reasons are multiple, variable and different from one case to another, they depend on the context of origin and arrival, as well as on the personal and family stories. «In Romania if you have no money, you starve, nobody helps you and there is no work, what do you do?». This is something that Roma often repeat. In Italy you can do something, by begging or working, someone give you money or food, you can find dumped clothes, shoes and appliances which can be recovered and sent to Romania. Alongside socio-economic factors, the wish, the desire, the dream of giving their children a better life and future, is one of the decisive motivations for leaving. It is for their children and families that men and women are willing to bear extremely harsh living conditions and the trial of living far away from home. All this intermingles with reasons of prestige: to emigrate is a valuable opportunity, it is something that not all people can face, which leads to acquiring a certain reputation

¹⁹ Caritas e Migrantes, 2014, XXIII Rapporto Immigrazione 2013, http://www.chiesacattolica.it/pls/cci_new_v3/V3_S2EW_CONSULTAZIONE.mostra_pagina?id_pagina=53507.

and social status. Consumption represents the best way towards which to show the success by means of some modernity and richness status symbols, such as big cars, designer clothes, music centres and television sets, as well as wedding and baptism parties, with many guests, grilled meat and wine, and musicians and *manele* singers. But the main asset on which the families invest is their home. One of the most important aims for those who migrate is to buy a house or to build a *vila* in Romania, if possible with two floors and in modern materials, close to the family or along the paved road, near to the Romanians, out of the *țigania* (Roma neighbourhood).

One of the main features of many Romanian Roma families migration is its temporariness, both for the frequent coming and going between Romania and Italy, as they go home when they have accumulated enough money and leave again when they run out, and because displacement is not considered as something permanent or long-term, but only as a temporary phase in life aimed at fulfilling some purposes at home. In fact, coming to Italy and enduring the extreme difficulties and daily violence of stigmatizing categorizations and “inclusion” policies, is necessary to fulfil some wishes and concrete projects in Romania, first of all a house, and the real or imaginary chance to build a better life for themselves and their families.

In practice, however, migration is never a linear path. It is a mixture of past, present and future, of dreams and projects continuously modified and adjusted according to concrete opportunities. Over the years, «the strategies could change and the occasional returns to the homecomings become more and more rare» (Olivera 2009, 186), especially for those who find a job, settle in regular dwellings and bring their children to Italy. Beyond thoughts and desires, migration often becomes and remains essential for the daily support of the family, so people spend most of the year in Italy, going back to Romania only for a few months, living the separation with suffering and grief. The migrants maintain and nurture daily the close connection with their country through phone calls, money sent, packages with sweets, toys and every kind of item which leave and those with vegetables, sunflower seeds and cigarettes which arrive, and vans that shuttle between Italy and Romania. These practices allow them to maintain a direct line with children and relatives at home. Their loved ones, their reference points and their certainties are and remain in Grădină and Balta-Olt.

They think, imagine and define their identity in reference to Romania, to their being Romanian citizens and inhabitants of a certain Region or village; to their being Roma, more or less in opposition to *gagé*, to Romanians, and to their belonging to a certain “Roma group” more or less different to Roma coming from other Regions; to their being part of their family, of their *njamo*; to their being migrants, in relation with the other Romanian citizens and with Italians, sometime involved in national strategies or local projects aimed at Rom, Sinti and Travellers.

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