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# Social Housing and Roma Residents in Romania

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## **Abstract**

Recent years have witnessed several initiatives of public authorities in Romania of housing Roma residents in specially built housing projects. Such measures are usually aimed at restoring dilapidated blocks of flats inhabited by extremely poor Roma people. Based on five case studies, this paper highlights the decline mechanisms in such marginal neighborhoods, and it examines whether these destructive factors are kept under control in the new housing projects. Policy recommendations are derived from research findings, aiming to increase social integration of the residents, and to prevent further housing failures.

## **Introduction**

This policy paper is a result of research in five Romanian towns where local authorities have designed housing projects for a dominantly Roma population: Piatra-Neamț, Bucharest, Roman, Tîrgu-Mureș, and Cluj-Napoca. The authorities addressed the problem of dilapidated blocks of flats, either because of plans for rehabilitation and reallocation, or (in Bucharest) because of external pressures. In order to rehabilitate the buildings, the authorities decided to relocate current residents (some of whom had no tenancy rights) in specially built accommodation. I have examined the new housing projects and the old buildings, in the cases where they had not yet been vacated. I have attempted to see whether relocation was only a way to dispatch the previous housing problems to a new, more convenient location, or also a way to address these problems.

After 1990 the state and in particular the local authorities have moved away from reckoning with the social problems of the homeless, concomitantly with a substantial increase in poverty. Evictions and various degrees of neglect have been the two major approaches for addressing clandestine inhabitants and squatters. It is only recently that the state has started to re-appropriate the housing problems of its citizens. While the National Agency for Housing focuses especially on the middle-class of young public employees, several local authorities have adopted initiatives to contain the social problems of their homeless residents by providing some form of housing. Such policies may use various strategies – from an attempted quarantine of problems by isolating the perceived problematic people, to attempts to assign social problems to agents that can solve them, in changeable combinations of support staff (social workers, social service providers, other civil servants) and beneficiaries.

Several public initiatives for addressing dilapidated buildings emerged in the last years in Romanian cities. The national media reported on cases in localities such as Piatra-Neamț, Roman, Tîrgu-Mureș, Miercurea Ciuc, Deva, Bacău<sup>1</sup> etc. The general tendency of these initiatives has been to collectively resettle the prevalingly Roma tenants in remote locales, at the margins of the town. This tendency acquired public visibility as a political project in October 2001, when the mayor of Piatra-Neamț stated that he plans to build a “ghetto” for the Roma, thus stirring political and media

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<sup>1</sup> Neighborhoods built by the local authorities in Piatra-Neamț and Roman have been included in the research that informs this paper. The cases of Deva and Bacău are presented in Zoon 2001, p. 124 – 125.

agitation. At that time mayors in cities of Deva and Baia-Mare also expressed their intention to build similar housing estates for local Roma, in order to contain the social problems of these unwanted residents.

The relocation of tenants from dilapidated buildings within the town to the urban periphery relegates their housing problems to marginal geographical and political territories, therefore alleviating pressures for finding solutions. For any particular case the question arises, whether this spatial displacement is only a part of the policy, or the entire policy. Are there additional measures put in place to deal with the housing problems and with the other sources of social marginalization of the residents? What solutions can be found to ensure social integration of residents in such housing projects?

## **Legislative context**

### ***Social housing in Romania***

Romania has recognized the right to an adequate standard of living, including housing, stipulated in the article 11, paragraph 1, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In national legislation the right to housing is stated in the Housing law no. 114 / 1996. As of June 2003, Romania has not ratified the Article 31 under the Revised European Social Charter, related to the right to housing (Council of Europe 2003). The United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing has reviewed the national Romanian legislation in relation to the right to housing in January 2002, with the following observations and recommendations (Kothari 2002, p. 9 and 20):

- a) Romania should enlarge its legislative definition of the right to housing beyond physical aspects, in order to include all seven dimensions of this right specified by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: (a) legal security of tenure including legal protection against forced evictions; (b) availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure; (c) affordability; (d) habitability; (e) accessibility for disadvantaged groups; (f) location; and (g) cultural adequacy;
- b) Romania should improve monitoring procedures, and it should urgently ratify Article 31 of the Revised European Social Charter;
- c) Existing strategies, such as the National Plan against Poverty and for the Promotion of Social Inclusion, should be widely implemented;
- d) The Government should particularly focus on access to housing of the poor and homeless, on the security of tenure, and on forced evictions.

According to the Rapporteur, housing problems in Romania are not limited to the exclusion of the vulnerable groups. The report highlights structural issues such as the cost of energy, the heating crisis, and the vulnerability to natural disasters. Still, the housing situation of vulnerable groups, particularly the Roma; the issues of forced evictions; and illegal settlements are seen as the dominant problems in the implementation of the right to housing in Romania.

The national legal environment for social housing provision is defined by the Housing Law L114 / 1996, the Law for Combating Discrimination L48 / 2002, and the Law for Preventing Social Marginalization L116 / 2002. The Housing Law acknowledges the right to housing and defines social housing as subsidized housing to be attributed to persons or families who cannot afford to obtain a house on the market (Art. 2). Social

housing is built, distributed, and managed by local authorities. The Law for preventing and combating marginalization also recognizes the right to housing, and it stipulates that Town Halls may (but they are not required to) raise funds in order to provide housing for young people (aged less than 35) who cannot afford to buy accommodation. Therefore, according to national legislation, local authorities have total freedom of choice regarding the provision of housing protection for the local homeless, or other vulnerable citizens.

Social housing provision can be described in terms of volume, design (access to utilities, position, size, etc), distribution, and management. The four variables are partially interrelated, as they all are associated with costs and hence with resources. The Romanian system of social housing can be briefly described as very low in volume, targeted to extremely poor people, and lacking an institutionalized system of management. Since there is a general consensus that the need of social housing in Romania greatly surpasses the supply, I will not examine issues of volume. Instead, I will focus in the following sections on topics related to the design, distribution, and administration of social housing projects.

The low volume of social housing is due to the fact that housing has not been a priority in Romanian social policy after 1990 (Kothari 2003, p. 10). The state has virtually ceased building houses after 1990, until 2000: the budget funds for housing construction decreased from 8.7% in 1989 to 0.76% in 2000 (Dan and Dan, 2003, p. 3). In 1999, less than 5% of the total housing stock was in public ownership, as a result of massive privatization in the previous decade (Pascariu & Stănculescu, p. 253). In the years 2000 – 2002 public authorities have built a total of only 6099 housing units, according to statistics provided by the Ministry of Transportation, Construction and Tourism<sup>2</sup>. Authorities have gradually re-started to build social housing within the program of the National Agency for Housing, functional since September 1999. The plans for 2003 included the construction of 15.800 habitation units, of which 1.600 social housing units (MTCT 2003). Still, the objectives of the National Agency for Housing do not explicitly include building social housing. They are instead centered on building housing for young employed people (ANL 2004), thus indirectly excluding the poorest people as potential beneficiaries.

Building, distributing, and managing social housing units are responsibilities of local authorities. The Housing Law stipulates income thresholds for eligible tenants and several grounds for priority, but concrete criteria for allocation are established at local level. The law also limits the rent level (as maximum of 10% of tenants' income) and states that the local budget must subsidize rents. Under these circumstances, it is clear that social housing is a considerable fiscal burden for local authorities, which are legally responsible for rent subsidies and for repairs (with the exception of damage inflicted by tenants).

Homeless persons and families have not represented a priority for the Romanian state. The only categories that have received some legal and / or material support are families rendered homeless by natural catastrophes and people evicted from restituted property (see Table 1). Squatter families are not eligible for any kind of special support and are not legally protected against forced evictions.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mt.ro/>

Table 1. Types of support for homeless people

	State intervention for flood and landslide victims	State intervention for tenants evicted from restituted property	State intervention for homeless (sleeping rough) persons
<b>National legislation</b>	- Governmental Decision HG 371 / 1993	-Emergency Governmental Decision OUG 40 /1999, adopted by Law 241 / 2001 - Law 10 / 2001	Bucharest: HG 684 / 1997, providing aid for homeless persons in winter
<b>Provisions</b>	- Regulates the Governmental use of resources to support people affected by natural calamities	- Rental contracts are prolonged for 5 years - Absolute priority for social housing	
<b>Cases</b>	Since 1995 there have been 24 Governmental Ordinances disbursing aid for affected communities <sup>3</sup>	Bucharest: OUG 83 / 2001 - Government has temporarily transferred 50 houses to local authorities for two years, to be rented as social housing for evicted people	Shelters supported by the Town Hall: Arad, Brasov, Bucharest (Sector 1), Cluj

### ***Discrimination against Roma people in housing policy***

While cases of direct discrimination against Roma people are difficult to prove, there is strong evidence to document indirect discrimination, in which facially neutral practices have disproportionate impact on Roma people (Krizsán 2001, p.17). Collective evictions affect mostly Roma neighborhoods. Roma people also have inferior accessibility to housing provided by the local authorities to young families, because of their lower educational attainment and higher rates of unemployment.

Ethnic segregation should be yet another major concern. Article 3 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination explicitly prohibits racial segregation: “States Parties particularly condemn racial segregation and apartheid; they undertake to prevent, prohibit, and eradicate all practices of this nature in territories under their jurisdiction” (see also Zoon 2000). Still, ethnic segregation cases and practices in Romania are monitored neither by public authorities, nor by Romanian civil society organizations.

Collective evictions in Romania can be considered discriminatory also because they are usually labeled in ethnic terms, as “evictions of the Gypsies”. This labeling process is obvious in media reports, or in interviews with authorities. Therefore, when using the test of the cultural significance suggested by Lawrence (1987), it is clear

<sup>3</sup> According to the database of the Ministry of Justice (Superlex), the following ordinances were issued: **1995:** HG 1064; **1996:** HG 650, HG 1403; **1997:** HG 103, HG 450, HG 330; **1998:** HG 40, HG 880, HG 250; **1999:** HG 1050; **2000:** HG 219, HG 254, HG 255, HG 379, HG 495; **2001:** HG 293, HG 651, HG 908; **2002:** HG 3, HG 851, HG 1002; **2003:** HG 2

that the practice of collective evictions is directed against the Roma people. The cultural significance test “would analyze governmental behavior much like a cultural anthropologist might: by considering evidence regarding the historical and social context in which the decision was made and effectuated” (Lawrence 1977, p. 355). The same test would also mark several housing projects as segregationist (including the much-debated project of Piatra-Neamț which is discussed below), since they are widely perceived to be “housing for Gypsies”.

### *Housing projects for Roma beneficiaries*

A survey conducted in 1998 by the Institute for Quality of Life Research indicates that about 20% of urban Roma people live in public housing. Another 61% live in privately owned housing, 13% live in housing rented on the private sector, and 5% have atypical residence (improvised, clandestine etc). In the rural areas the vast majority of Roma people live in privately owned housing (88%), and only 1% of rural Roma live in public housing (Dan 2002, p. 199). Of the total urban Romanian population, only 2.5% lived in 1998 in public housing. Public housing is therefore a dominantly urban reality, and it also has a strong ethnic dimension.

**Table 2. Housing ownership, 1998. Source: Dan (2002)**

	Urban population (%)		Rural population (%)	
	Roma sample	General sample	Roma sample	General sample
<b>Public housing</b>	20.4	2.5	1.2	1.5
<b>Rent in private sector</b>	13.4	1.9	3.9	0.4
<b>Private ownership</b>	60.8	93.7	88.1	94.5
<b>Atypical residence (Squatter, improvised housing)</b>	5.3	2.0	6.8	3.6
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The housing deprivation of Roma population in Romania has been clearly documented (Zamfir & Zamfir 1993, Dan 2002). Adrian Dan (2002) indicates that the number of persons per room is double for the Roma population (2.23 persons per room), than for the total Romanian population (1.18 persons per room) (p. 184). The lack of various utilities, such as kitchen, bathroom in house, gas, sewage, and electricity also decreases quality of housing.

Table 3. Differences in housing quality. 1998. Source: Dan (2002)

	<b>Roma sample '98 (%)</b>	<b>Total sample '98 (%)</b>
<b>Houses with kitchen</b>	36.3	75.8
<b>Houses with bathroom inside</b>	28.3	21.4
<b>Connection to natural gas network</b>	20.8	44.9
<b>Connection to sewage network</b>	24.2	54.4
<b>Connection to electricity</b>	87.3	99.2

Phare support has recently pushed Roma housing on the national policy agenda. The Ministry of Information has reported (MIP 2003, p. 54-55) that several ministries are involved in planning solutions for Roma housing issues such as: 1) solving ownership issues related to houses and agricultural terrain; 2) rehabilitation of housing and environment in Roma neighborhoods, over the next 4 years; 3) supporting firms and NGO's involved in providing infrastructure and utilities in Roma neighborhoods; 4) supporting projects of housing construction and rehabilitation in Roma communities; 5) supporting local Roma initiatives of housing rehabilitation and construction; and 6) building social housing allowing non-discriminatory access to Roma (over the next 10 years).

The governmental program "Partnership for Roma Support - 2003" has granted 1.6 million Euros for projects in three areas: income-generating activities, housing, and agricultural activities. The Phare Program for Supporting the Strategy of Improving the Roma Situation 2004-2005 will provide grants in several areas, including small infrastructure and social housing (CRCR 2004). The total value of the Phare program will be 6 million Euros. It is noteworthy that the previous two Phare programs for supporting the Governmental strategy for the Roma did not explicitly promote housing projects. Out of the 40 projects financed out of the Phare Roma Partnership Fund in 2001-2002, only one involved housing rehabilitation and securing property rights (Murray 2001, p. 4). The Fund for Improving Roma Situation (2002-2004) supported 36 projects in areas such as community development, education, health, civic participation, and social security; the only area related to housing involved the clarification of ownership acts. While housing projects were not excluded, they were not encouraged, and the high costs associated with building or repairing houses discouraged applicants. The explicit priority granted to housing is a recent development in the design of Phare projects for Roma communities, acknowledging the relevance of housing for human rights and welfare.

## Presentation of case studies

I have examined public housing projects in five localities. The next sections examine interview and observation data from field trips. The last field visits were in September 2003. Since these vicinities were relatively small in size and recently created, the situations seemed to be easily amenable to change as a result of public intervention. I believe that administrative neglect was the main factor that underlined the stability of their decline.

**Table 4. Case-study neighborhoods**

	<b>Bucharest</b>	<b>Cluj-Napoca</b>	<b>Piatra-Neamț</b>	<b>Tîrgu Mureș</b>	<b>Roman</b>
<b>Locality population (2002)</b>	1,926 thou.	318 thou.	105 thou.	150 thou.	70 thou.
<b>Case-study neighborhoods</b>	Zăbrăuțului Str. 5 buildings 400 housing units	Canton Str. (13 containers)	GOC neighborhood (Izvoare) (one single-story barrack, 28 housing units) Siretului Str. (one building, 30 units) Tiparului Str. (one building)	Rovinari Str., 24 (one building, 60 units)	Fabricii Str. (4 single-storey buildings)
<b>New housing project</b>		Yes	Yes: Sperantei/GOC		Yes
<b>Dilapidated blocks of flats</b>	Yes		Yes: Siretului Str., Tiparului Str.	Yes	

## *Bucharest*

The neighborhood located on Zăbrăuțului Street, popularly called Zăbrăuți, comprises five blocks of flats, each housing around 80 families<sup>4</sup>. It has a rather central location, embedded in a residential district, but it also borders a large area where many of the Bucharest Roma people live, Ferentari. Before 1990 the buildings were used as hostels for single workers. The apartments are composed of a small room with a little kitchen-hall and unlike many such hostels they have individual toilet facilities.

The history of the neighborhood goes back to the decision of the communist authorities to demolish the buildings because of their low residential comfort. The blocks were erased from all property registers, but they were still standing when the 1989 Revolution led to the collapse of the communist regime. Shortly afterwards squatters occupied the buildings, which had already reached an advanced state of deterioration.

References to Zăbrăuți can be found in international evaluations such as the report of the UN Rapporteur on the right to housing (Kothari 2002, pp. 14-15), in the ERRC report “State of Impunity” (ERRC 2001, p. 36, 53, 63), and in the intervention of Congressman Christopher H. Smith on Romania’s chairmanship of OSCE (Smith 2001). Reports take into account the housing situation and its implications, particularly the once frequent Police raids and the difficult access to schooling and health care. Because it is a neighborhood easily reached, in central Bucharest, it has attracted more monitoring visits than other places.

The situation of total administrative abandonment persisted until 1996, interrupted only by Police raids that fined inhabitants for lacking residence permits. In 1996 the United Nations Development Program in Bucharest launched a pilot project of poverty eradication in the area. The project substantially improved housing in the area. Garbage piles were systematically removed, running water was introduced in the buildings, and electricity was also legalized using collective meters. Children from Zăbrăuți could go to kindergarten and school, supported by the program’s material and administrative interventions. The UNDP program structured the neighborhood’s future as a social housing project. The Mayoralty of the 5<sup>th</sup> sector of Bucharest took over the buildings, which had no owners at the time. The authorities transformed them into social housing and started to issue tenure contracts – first for three months, then for one year, and finally for five years, with access to ownership<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> I have been conducting interviews in Zabrauti since 1998, within the international research project “Cities, the Environment and Gender Relations” supported by MOST-UNESCO (see details at [www.zabrauti.go.ro](http://www.zabrauti.go.ro) and [www.unesco.org/most/p66.htm](http://www.unesco.org/most/p66.htm)). Along the last years I could also observe some public events in the life of the neighborhood, such as managing electricity crises, picketing the Town Hall for tenure contracts, reactions to various reportages and political meetings. I have meanwhile conducted interviews with residents, NGO staff (UNDP and subsequently MDM Suisse), local leaders and administrators, the local councilor that represents the neighborhood, and the director of the Electricity Company.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed presentation of evolutions in Zabrauti neighborhood, see the site [www.zabrauti.go.ro](http://www.zabrauti.go.ro)

In 2000 the UNDP program came to its end. A local team of Médecins du Monde Suisse started to provide medical and social assistance to Zăbrăuți residents until 2003, when it had to stop due to a financial crisis.

### Segregation

In many cases de-facto inhabitants were granted tenure contracts. Evictions were not uncommon, and keeping a room in Zăbrăuți required in the end skills and determination. The main risks for residents came from loan-sharks, although some of the “local leaders” were involved in allegations of illegally trading rooms. The Town Hall was (intentionally, or not) tolerating this informal trade (which is explicitly prohibited by the Housing Law), by allowing de-facto residents to become legal tenants, instead of following centralized priority lists of applicants.

This quasi-market allocation led to a mixed population of residents. The demand for affordable housing in Bucharest greatly surpasses the supply, and housing in Zăbrăuți has always been particularly cheap. There are no maintenance costs, because there is no legal access to utilities, and the rent is very small, of about USD 2 (compared to a rent of about USD 30 for a similar room on the private market). Families who were rendered homeless for various reasons (divorce, indebtedness, fraud), young couples that lacked alternative accommodation, as well as migrants searching for employment in Bucharest were willing to find shelter there. At the same time, many families left the area, either pushed by conflicts, or because they found better housing elsewhere.

### Administration

The UNDP program has institutionalized an “Initiative Committee”, which was responsible for representing residents in relation with the project coordinator and with local authorities. Subsequently the project organized a Residents’ Association, and administrators were put in place for each building. After several scandals around abuses of community money, the administrators stopped raising maintenance fees and preserved a strictly political function. Local leaders were essential in organizing collective protests to deal with electricity cuts in winter, or with plans for evictions in one of the buildings.

Tenants pay rents individually, at the public company in charge with managing public housing in the 5<sup>th</sup> Sector of the city. There is no system of building maintenance, or repairs. Cleaning persons are informal workers, and residents pay them individually, if they choose to. The local authorities have sporadically collected the garbage accumulated in the spaces between the blocks.

### Tenant autonomy

Until legalization of residence, lack of ID papers was a serious cause for social exclusion and legal vulnerability of the inhabitants. Although ID problems persist, the situation has been alleviated by issuing tenure contracts and by the work of the Médecins du Monde Suisse team, who assisted residents to obtain identity papers.

Currently, the most important source of vulnerability for Zăbrăuți tenants is the illegal consumption of electricity. The collective meter scheme has failed soon after its implementation by UNDP, for several reasons. Families could not adjust their payments to their incomes by declining consumption, and they resented the high bills as unfair (all tenants had to pay the same amount, independently of individual consumption levels). The bills were anyway impossible to pay in the long run, since

nobody refrained from using electricity extensively (especially for heating and cooking on improvised radiators). Administrators were involved in scandals related to misusing electricity payments (two of them had run away with the money, without being prosecuted in any way up to this date).

The illegality of electricity connections turned into a crisis in the winter of 2002, when the Electricity Company started a campaign against illegal consumers. All buildings had been cut from illegal wiring for a week in late December 2002, being thus deprived of their main (and usually the only) heating source. In early 2003 thirty-four families received fines of up to 350 USD, which they would have been unable to pay without the support of the MDM foundation. A second round of fines followed in March 2003. Another round of fines may result in the direct imprisonment of the people caught for the third time.

The buildings have accumulated collective debts (amounting to about USD 230,000) towards the Electricity Company in the period where collective meters were functioning. These debts are virtually impossible to repay. An attempt was made to distribute these debts to individual residents in order to solve the crisis, but it predictably failed. The Town Hall paid approximately one quarter of the debts when the first major crisis occurred in 2002, in order to facilitate a temporary relief for the residents. Still, the municipality has shown no interest in solving the electricity problem – which would require investments in alternative heating systems and in a new electrical installation for the buildings. Contracts signed by inhabitants falsely stipulate that the rooms have a functional electrical installation, therefore absolving the local authorities of all formal responsibilities. The Electricity Company is decided to cut losses in Zăbrăuți, which registers during winter months the highest losses among Bucharest distribution points. Still, there is no easy solution. Connecting the apartments to electricity is expensive for families (estimated at about USD 30 / apartment). Moreover, the Company is unwilling to connect only the few families who are willing to pay the price and who have applied for legalization, since this would not solve the issue of large-scale electricity-theft.

Running water is also a problem, because consumption is not metered and not paid for. The quality of water is also very low. Still, the legal crisis has not yet begun, because Apa Nova, the water distribution company, has not taken steps to cut such losses.

## Conclusions

Zăbrăuți has been a partially successful attempt to solve the catastrophic situation of a poor Roma neighborhood. UNDP was effective in transferring the legal ownership of the problems to the Town Hall, by converting the ownerless buildings in social housing. Legal ownership did not translate though into a full commitment to address local predicaments. Local authorities exercise discretionary power in deciding what issues are to be addressed. The lack of legal access to water and electricity, together with the absence of a heating system, maintains inhabitants into a precarious housing situation, with risks of disease and of penal sanctions. The UNDP sponsored system of common electricity consumption was only a reinforcement of the “tragedy of the commons” scenario, as the scheme collapsed in a couple of months.

Tenants mention that criminality in the area, once a serious concern, has been significantly reduced by Police intervention and by a process of tenant turnover that contributed to a displacement of some of the most marginal people. Except for this improvement tendency, there is little going on in terms of approaching neighborhood

problems. Administration of the neighborhood currently amounts to little more than allocating rooms, cashing rent payments, and reacting to situations of serious crisis and street protest of the tenants. The Town Hall makes no investments, repairs, or any other types of maintenance of the buildings. Garbage collection is unsystematic and non-efficient, basements are flooded, and the quality of drinking water is a health hazard.

The local leaders have played an ambivalent role in the administration of the neighborhood. They managed to coordinate some collective efforts and to deliver a certain degree of authority and control in the neighborhood, acting as intermediaries for the public administration. On the other hand, the total lack of accountability allowed for repeated abuses and led to a quasi-total loss of legitimacy for the leadership.

### *Piatra Neamț*

The housing project in Piatra-Neamț<sup>6</sup> has become famous when the Mayor declared his intentions to segregate the Roma in a well-guarded colony at the margin of the city, in October 2001. The Mayor had even used the term “ghetto” (Haller 2001), stirring a huge media scandal. The Prime Minister and the President issued condemnation statements (see Gergely & Morteau 2001 for a systematic review of political statements on the issue). The ERRC Memorandum for the UN Rapporteur on the right to housing (ERRC 2002) and the Rapporteurs’ account mentioned the Mayor’s project as proof of segregation tendencies (Kothari 2002, p. 16). The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights ODIHR – OSCE has organized a round table on confidence building held in Piatra-Neamț (ODIHR 2002), attempting to establish a monitoring system to prevent discrimination of Roma in access to social housing. The scandal has also been presented in the international media (Totok 2001, O’Mahony 2001, Radio Free Europe 2001).

The Mayor of Piatra-Neamț has continued his plans to resettle inhabitants from three dilapidated buildings in a new neighborhood that was under construction in the adjoining Izvoare village. At the time of my field visits, two dilapidated buildings had already been vacated for almost one year, and another two (Tiparului / D2 and

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<sup>6</sup> I have visited Piatra-Neamț on two occasions, in May 2003 (together with Anca Tomsa, senior student in sociology) and in September 2003 (together with Vera Mitroi, graduate student in sociology). During these field trips I have interviewed the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor of Piatra-Neamț, the administrator of GOC neighborhood, a social worker from the Mayoralty, the local Roma expert in Prefectura, and residents from GOC, Tiparului and Siretului buildings. I have also visited the site where the 15 container-houses are installed.

Siretului 18) were planned for evictions, awaiting the completion of the new housing units.

The D2 building, on Tiparului Street, is a 5-level block inhabited by circa 40 households. The block offers individual access to electricity and central heating. The rent is about USD 2 / month. The main difficulty comes from the common toilets, which are constantly broken and lead to inundations and ensuing inconveniences for tenants. The building 18 on Siretului Street includes circa 30 households; common toilets have been totally dysfunctional for years. Rooms have individual electricity connections and wood stoves. Some residents have horses, and they have built stables behind the block. People take water from an outside tap located at about 30 meters from the building.

The new housing project for residents of Tiparului and Siretului buildings, popularly designated as GOC, is located on the site of a former chicken farm. The housing units consisted in one-level barracks taken over from the farm, which were divided into 30 sq.m. rooms and equipped with individual sanitary facilities, a stove, and electricity. One such barrack includes 28 families. Other 56 families would be housed in two similar barracks. In addition to them, other families who own horses are planned for resettlement in 15 housing units built from transformed railway wagons, on a land parcel situated at the periphery of the city, in between the old and the new city garbage dumps. The construction cost per room in the GOC barracks is estimated to be around ROL 62.5 million (USD 1900), while the cost for one wagon-housing is estimated to be around ROL 210 million (USD 6500)<sup>7</sup>, surprisingly higher than barracks housing.

The GOC neighborhood is located in the immediate vicinity of the “Speranța” quarter (which translates into “Hope” quarter). This neighborhood includes five former barracks that have been rehabilitated into two-level buildings, with a total of 155 apartments. The quality of housing units is substantially higher in Speranța, although the rent level is similar (around USD 15). Another five barracks will be renovated into blocks of flats starting with 2004. The Speranța neighborhood has been built within the National Housing Agency program (except for one of the buildings that has been financed locally as a pilot project), and therefore apartments are

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<sup>7</sup> According to local newspaper Evenimentul, on February 4, 2004 (Vor fi finalizate alte 15 locuințe-container), [www.evenimentul.ro](http://www.evenimentul.ro)

distributed according to special criteria corresponding to NHA priorities, approved by the Local Council. In Piatra-Neamț the list of criteria for NHA apartments grants maximum priority to university graduates who work in public institutions<sup>8</sup>.

The first tenants started to move in the new apartments in September 2003.

### Segregation

According to the Local Council criteria for housing distribution, it is obvious that a majority Roma population would inhabit the GOC neighborhood, while a non-Roma population would inhabit the adjoining Speranța neighborhood. Still, borders are not totally impenetrable: Five of the Roma families from GOC, who fulfilled the condition of having an employee member, had been relocated in Speranța, upon their request.

Because at the time of my field visit the only residents in the area were the 28 Roma families from the first GOC barrack, I could not estimate the degree to which territorial proximity of Speranța and GOC translates into neighborhood encounters. It is also to be seen whether children from both neighborhoods would attend the same school and kindergarten in the future (the school and kindergarten were at that time planned for construction).

### Administration

The first barrack from GOC has been taken over by PubliServ, a company owned by the municipality. One public servant was in charge with concluding contracts, collecting rents, and supervising the well being of the neighborhood. There were no resident administrators or local leaders; communication took place directly between tenants and the PubliServ administrator, either at the company office, or during field visits (about two per week). The administrator felt that the social problems of the tenants were overwhelming, and the company suffered losses due to tenant indebtedness for rent and for previous electricity consumption (before meters had been installed).

The next two barracks would be attributed for management to another company owned by the Municipality (Aqua Calor SA), which is also in charge with managing the blocks in Speranța.

### Tenant autonomy

Housing units in GOC have individual access to sanitary facilities and other utilities (electricity, water). Residents are generally satisfied with the living conditions. The main problems confronting tenants are indebtedness and relative geographical isolation, due to the costs of transportation to the city that is now outside walking distance. The barracks in GOC are not, administratively speaking, “social housing” (for which rent is subsidized until it reaches a maximum of 10% of tenants’ income), but just “public housing”; therefore, rents levels (USD 15 / month, equaling about

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<sup>8</sup> According to local newspaper Evenimentul, on March 17, 2004 (Criterii dure pentru primirea unei locuințe), available on [www.evenimentul.ro](http://www.evenimentul.ro)

ROL 500,000) are relatively high compared to tenants' income. For many tenants the only formal income source is the minimum guaranteed income<sup>9</sup>.

Tenants have also complained about the difficulties of using wood for heating (lacking any storage space) and about the poor space partition, which means that the kitchen is actually in the living room (which also functions as bedroom). The municipality declares that there are plans for introducing heating centrals based on gas.

### Conclusions

The case of Piatra-Neamț has been the first to draw substantial public attention in Romania toward the risk of ethnic segregation. It has also been the first and, up to current date, the most important housing project with Roma beneficiaries since 1990. Therefore a discussion of the social significance of this project is inherently ambivalent.

From an administrative point of view, there are two important changes incorporated in the GOC neighborhood: individual access to utilities and an administrator who, despite being a civil servant, makes periodical field visits and has meaningful contact with residents. To this we can add the institution of the Community Police, which employs guardians for all neighborhoods in the city, including GOC. High rents, geographical isolation, and perspectives of increased stigma and risks of insecurity due to the concentration of Roma residents from various places in the same neighborhood are the main complaints of actual and would-be tenants.

### *Roman*

In the fall of 2001 the municipality of Roman<sup>10</sup> resettled the 106 tenants of a dilapidated building (the "NATO" block) in two renovated one-level barracks on the Fabricii Street, at the margins of the locality.

The barracks had previously been stables; they were divided into rooms (approximately 30 sq.m.) that had access to electricity, common toilets, and common water taps. Meanwhile the toilets had become dysfunctional. Heating is based on wood. Each tenant can use a small parcel of land situated in front of his window to build annexes, or for storage.

The housing project on Fabricii Street in Roman has attracted considerably less public attention than the Piatra-Neamț project. Still, it received a monitoring visit from the

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<sup>9</sup> The Law of the Minimum Guaranteed Income L416/2001 stipulates that all Romanian citizens are entitled to a minimum income guaranteed by the state as a form of social assistance. For households who have incomes lower than the guaranteed income, the state pays a social aid equal to the difference between the actual income and the guaranteed income. The levels of the minimum guaranteed income for families are (in the beginning of year 2004): 2 persons – 1,480,000 lei; 3 persons – 2,057,000 lei; 4 persons – 2,547,000 lei

<sup>10</sup> I have paid one field visit to Roman in September 2003 (together with Vera Mitroi, graduate student in sociology). On this occasion I have conducted interviews with the Mayor, the civil servant in charge with social protection, the two neighborhood administrators, the teacher, the school director, and local residents.

Roma NGO Romani CRISS, who, according to recollections of local authorities, gave very good evaluations.

### Segregation

Another barrack has been meanwhile added to the complex; it has been used to relocate tenants that were evicted from the town's blocks of flats, because of heavy indebtedness. Because of this mixture of residents, the residents estimate that only about half of the tenants in the Fabricii neighborhood are Roma.

In September 2003 children from the neighborhood could enroll in the local school (that only had one class for the first grade), which was hosted in a room in one of the buildings. Another room was transformed into a kindergarten. Parents have the choice to enroll their children in the neighborhood or in the other school which is located about one kilometer away; most of them preferred the local class because it was less demanding financially, and because it also accepted older children.

### Administration

The Municipality has decided to pay for two residents as local administrators. They are in charge with collecting rents and other payments, and they intermediate the communication between residents and the local authorities on other issues (such as repairs, or ID cards). They have also contributed to organize a festival of Roma people in the locality, acting as general representatives of the community. The Town Hall also pays for a tenant to work as cleaning woman for the local school and for two additional cleaning women that sweep and wash the four buildings.

The two local administrators have considerable influence on suggesting evictions, and they are the only interlocutors of the Mayor. Since the local authorities powerfully enforce their authority, it has been difficult to detect anything but barely visible traces of dissent among residents towards the two leaders.

In October 2002 seven families were evicted for rent arrears and antisocial behavior (the two leaders mentioned scandals, subletting, and vandalism). Since then there had been no other evictions, despite the fact that the majority of the residents are heavily indebted.

### Tenant autonomy

Residents deplored the common utilities - especially the broken toilets, and the common water tap. There are also no showers. Since there were no individual meters for water, people felt that consumption costs are not shared equitably. Moreover, because arrears were redistributed monthly among residents, the ones who paid also had to support a fraction of the others' consumption debts. Breakdowns in the water installation were fixed with some delays, which led to losses that had to be eventually paid by each tenant.

Rents were computed as 10% of the income for recipients of the minimum guaranteed income, and ROL 140,000 (USD 4) for the others<sup>11</sup>. Since the majority of families were indebted for several months, they were living under the risk of eviction. The

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<sup>11</sup> People do not receive the social aid for the minimum guaranteed income (MGI) if their identity cards are not valid, or (rarely) if they have alternative sources of income that amount to a larger amount than the MGI.

Mayorality was not planning evictions in the immediate future, but they had decided to conclude only short-term contracts for people who had debts, or even not to renew their contracts unless they paid the arrears. This, in turn, led to problems with residence permits (ID cards) for many families. Interviews with residents and with the Roma expert at Prefectură<sup>12</sup> (in the county capital Piatra-Neamț) indicate that the lack of valid ID papers was perceived as the most serious problem in the neighborhood.

### Conclusions

The housing project in Roman points to the difficulties of managing impoverished neighborhoods. Unlike other projects, it involves a relatively well-established administrative system. The neighborhood gradually broadened to include a local school and a local kindergarten. The Town Hall employs two local administrators, and maintenance personnel. Still, common consumption of utilities (water) and common toilets have been, as could have been expected, a constant source of problems.

Another significant difficulty reported by tenants is the lack of ID cards, due to loss of tenure rights after prolonged indebtedness. Persistent indebtedness, despite relatively low rent levels, points to problems in rent collection.

Another distinctive feature of the neighborhood consists in the tenant allocation mechanisms that have promoted an ethnically mixed neighborhood, by combining applicants who had been evicted from various places and for various reasons. Unlike the pseudo-market allocation mechanisms that had been at work in Zăbrăuți, the allocation of rooms in the Fabricii project has followed a strategy established by the authorities, aiming to reduce losses due to indebtedness in its other public housing projects in the city.

### *Tîrgu-Mureș*

The block n° 24 on Rovinari Street in Tîrgu Mureș<sup>13</sup> is situated at the northern margin of the locality. It includes 60 apartments (with one, two or three rooms), with two separate entrances. Only 22 families have tenure contracts; others either have no contract at all, or their previous contract has been cancelled because of debts. The building was scheduled for rehabilitation within a project financed by the National Agency for Housing. Still, the plans have been repeatedly postponed because the local authorities could not find resources to relocate the legal tenants. In 2003 the municipality earned a grant from the Phare program of supporting housing for Roma families, destined to the rehabilitation of a building on Băneasa Street, in which the 22

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<sup>12</sup> The Prefect is the representative of the Central Government at county level.

<sup>13</sup> I have visited Tîrgu Mureș in April, and September 2003 (together with Anca Tomșa, senior student in sociology). We have applied a small questionnaire to respondents living illegally in the building, and we have interviewed five families in the neighborhood, and the local administrator. We have also visited the local shelter for homeless people, where we have spoken to the director and the psychologist. Within the Town Hall we have interviewed the expert in charge with monitoring, and distributing apartments in social housing units. We have had brief discussions with the expert for Roma issues within the Prefectura, the director of the Planning Department within the Municipality, the director of the company in charge with managing the social housing buildings.

families can be resettled. At the time of my last visit, in September 2003, the authorities did not have any solutions for resettling the remaining families.

I have collected some summary statistical data about the illegal tenants in Rovinari 24, which are presented in Table 5. These data indicate that the vast majority of families are at least partially based in the locality (including, but not consisting entirely of migrants from the countryside); most of them were living in the building for more than 5 years, and more than half of them had applied for social housing. Since the building was planned for eviction, the local authorities did not want to legally attribute rooms in the Rovinari block. Legalizing residence for de-facto tenants would mean that after eviction the tenants have legal rights to receive alternative accommodation, which authorities could not provide under current conditions.

**Table 5. Approximate description of squatter inhabitants of Rovinari 24**

Number of squatter households (apartments) visited	29
Number of families living in these apartments (adult persons or couples, with minor children)	53 (in one room there are 7 adult inhabitants)
Number of inhabitants	179, of which 72 minor children
Number of respondents	29 (one respondent per room)
Number of respondents living in a couple (legally married or not) where at least one spouse has a local ID card	26
Number of respondents living in the building for more than 5 years	18
Number of respondents living in a family supported by social aid	13
Number of respondents who have applied for social housing	17 (of which 12 have applied 3 times or more, up to 10 times)

There has been considerable tenant turnover, which was not monitored by the local authorities. Illegal tenants accumulated debts for consumption, but they did not pay them (debts were not legally associated with their name either). This gradually led to the block being cut off from utilities and to various improvisations for electricity and heating provision. The building is in a very poor condition: many flats have all utilities cut (except for running water) because of high debts. Some flats still have electricity, but their residents complain about electricity theft that inflates their bills. Gas has been cut for the entire building, and heating is mainly based on burning wood.

## *Cluj-Napoca*

The Mayorality of Cluj-Napoca<sup>14</sup> decided in the winter of 2002 to evict the thirteen squatter families living in the historical building called Casa Călăului (“The Executioner’s House”). The thirteen Roma families living there were first moved to an emergency shelter in the basement of a block of flats. The inhabitants of the block protested the decision, and the Roma families were transferred to metal barracks situated on a land parcel at the end of the locality, on Cantonului Street. In the same neighborhood there is another colony of barracks for evicted people, and in the vicinity there is the larger Pata-Rât colony of squatters, whose inhabitants live by scavenging in the close-by garbage dump.

The barracks lack any thermal insulation, and there is no electricity connection. The families use one external water tap and one common toilet cabin. There is also no garbage collection system, the garbage being incinerated outside.

Since the barracks are legally not fit for housing, tenants do not have social housing contracts. The Town Hall had concluded with them one-year rental contracts that grant them the right to use the barracks for free.

The media coverage of the Canton neighborhood has been substantially lower than in the Piatra-Neamț case, despite the faulty conditions in which the Rom families were resettled. Local press articles described the new housing conditions as being much better than the reality showed: allegedly the barracks were made of wood and connected to electricity, running water, and sewage<sup>15</sup>. There have also been no public protests from NGO’s in Romania related to the eviction and substandard relocation of the Roma in Casa Călăului.

A comparison between the case of Piatra-Neamț and Cluj Napoca suggests some interesting conclusions. The racist statements of the Piatra-Neamț Mayor have mobilized the Romanian public opinion. NGO’s active in the field of human rights such as Romani CRISS and Pro Europe League have visited the town and distributed reports on the situation (Gergely & Morteau 2001, Haller 2001). Authorities were compelled to react, at least by issuing statements. Nevertheless, the segregation actions of the Cluj-Napoca Mayorality have passed largely unnoticed in the Romanian public sphere. The ERRC was the only one to monitor them (Bedard 2003). One explanation may come from the smaller number of families involved. Another important reason was probably the fact that they were all squatters, and thus the

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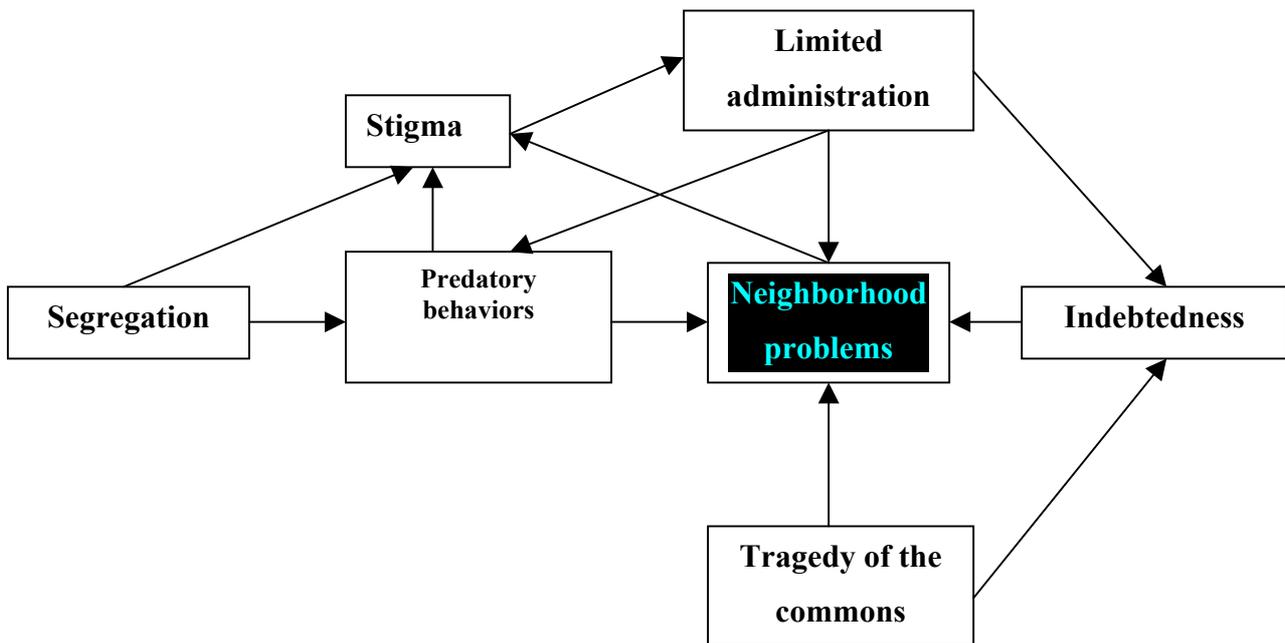
<sup>14</sup> I have visited Cluj-Napoca on two occasions, in July 2003 together with Leonard Sultănescu (senior student, Bucharest University) and in February 2003. I have visited the Canton neighborhoods and also a similar neighborhood on Byron Street 15. During these field trips I have talked to a Deputy Mayor, to civil servants and experts on Roma issues within the Town Hall, to NGO staff working in Pata-Rât colony, and occasionally in the Canton colony, with a local reporter, and with residents in Canton and Byron settlements.

<sup>15</sup> NATIONAL, article signed by R.N., according to Inforrom, Dec. 2, 2002; similar article in OGLINDA, according to Inforrom, Dec. 3, 2002

Romanian housing law did not cover them. Last but not least, a third reason probably lies in the absence of an accompanying racist discourse from the local authorities. The case of Cluj-Napoca evictions and resettlement illustrates the total lack of legal protection for homeless persons or families. Local authorities have discretionary power in this regard.

### Decline mechanisms in housing projects

Case studies indicate several typical drifting mechanisms that lead to housing deterioration, which are detailed in the following sections. Such mechanisms involve a combination of social structures and penury, which affect authorities' and tenants' inclinations to address problems.



An important force that perturbs the welfare of a neighborhood is ethnic segregation (which can be also welfare-based, concomitantly segregating the extremely poor, as in the case of Roma), which leads to the creation of areas of concentrated disadvantage. There is a consistent body of literature arguing that segregation has a negative effect on the performance of public services, because of neighborhood stigma and agglomeration of problems, which lead to decreased motivation of service providers. Another pernicious mechanism is the so-called “tragedy of the commons”, which derives its name and fame precisely from its inevitableness (Hardin 1968). Whenever important aspects of housing (such as electricity, toilets, water, etc) are consumed collectively, without the possibility of restricting use for individuals, it is likely that degradation occurs. Lack of utilization rules makes such deterioration impossible to tackle at the level of tenants. Moreover, even when repairs are done by the authorities, they are unsustainable, since there is no individual responsibility in maintaining the facility.

The inadequacy of the administrative system for social housing projects is an important cause of gradual housing deterioration. Despite the numerous problems that are bound to appear in areas of concentrated social disadvantage, administrative bodies in such areas are understaffed and based on improvisation and personal

dedication, rather than professionalized. Therefore, the administrative system is short-handed, and / or it lacks specific assets such as local knowledge or a sympathetic disposition.

As a result of sketchy administration, authorities implement a policy of limited tolerance (postponement of actions and sanctions) toward various problems. This contributes to problems such as predatory behaviors and also tenant indebtedness, which becomes a major risk for the family and aggravates housing problems in the neighborhood.

### ***Ethnic segregation***

In the following analysis I understand segregation as a political project and as a personal experience of residents in the locality, without using quantitative indicators. I have operationally defined segregation as the existence (or the creation) of an area (which can be large, but also small enough to include only one building), which is clearly marked in the public knowledge as ethnically Roma and as poor. Segregation is often (but not always) associated with a peripheral position within the locality and therefore with isolation. Since my focus of interest is on areas of concentrated disadvantage, I do not discuss the neighborhoods that are marked as Roma, but not as poor.

#### General context

The effects of segregation on the life-chances of residents depend on many local conditions. Ethnicity is a particularly important variable, because of the likely reification of ethnic distinctions in public discourses. Moral sympathy often extends only to one's own ethnic group, and maybe to selected others; in European societies, the Roma are more frequently scapegoats than fellow citizens.

Research on the social construction of the Roma identity in Romania and other East-European countries has shown that residence in a neighborhood defined as Roma / Gypsy is one of the main indicators that are used to hetero-identify a person as a Roma / Gypsy when she claims not to be so. Analyzing a sample including respondents from Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania, P. Ahmed *et. al.* concluded that "if the interviewer perceives the respondent to be living in a predominantly Roma or Gypsy settlement, the respondent is nearly 12 times as likely to be categorized as Roma" (Ahmed *et. al.* 2001, p. 12). Looking at the same data, J. Ladányi and I. Szelényi observed that the degree of segregation was almost identical with the proportion of self-identification. For example, in Romania, out of all the people who were hetero-identified as Roma by the interviewer during the screening phase, only 31% auto-identified as Roma. At the same time, 28% of the people hetero-identified as Roma were living in dominantly or exclusively Roma settlements. The same degree of similarity between auto-identification and segregation can be witnessed in Bulgaria and Hungary (Ladányi & Szelényi 2002, pp. 86-87). G. Kligman concludes that poverty and segregated residence are two ingredients of the post-communist "Gypsy" hetero-label: "The local transformation of attributing 'Gypsy' identity to those who claim not to have been so identified before the collapse of communism seems to be largely the consequence of two interrelated factors: worsening poverty levels and geographical segregation" (Kligman 2002, p. 73). Since being Roma in Romania is stigmatizing, it follows that residential segregation imposes clear costs on residents regarding their capacity of self-presentation.

Costs of segregation extend well beyond the symbolic realm. For example, research on education indicates a strong influence of residential segregation on access to quality schooling: “The likelihood of overcrowded classes in primary schools in which Romani pupils prevail<sup>16</sup> was more than 3 times higher than for all rural schools. For secondary schools in which Romani pupils prevail this likelihood was more than 9 times higher than for the whole system. (...) Schools in which Romani pupils prevail indicated a shortage of qualified teachers almost two times higher (83.5%) than that of all rural schools (43.5%)” (Surdu 2003 [1], p. 12-13).

Because of the ambiguity of the “Roma” ethnonym, it is difficult to measure precisely the degree of residential segregation of Roma people. J. Ladányi and I. Szelényi indicate that 10.9% of Romanian Roma live in Gypsy settlements, while 17.1 % live in neighborhoods where a majority of the population is Roma (Ladányi & Szelényi 2002, p. 87). Using a different sampling methodology, the Research Institute for Quality of Life estimated that about 29% of the Roma live in compact Roma communities, while an additional 27% live in mixed communities (Surdu 2003 [2], p. 87; the sampling methodology is described in Zamfir 2002).

In the case of the Roma, segregation is often an explicit political objective of the state. Segregationist attitudes of public authorities towards the Roma have been documented in European countries such as Greece, Italy, Spain, the Czech republic or Slovakia. For example, Greek authorities have systematically postponed any intervention to improve the dehumanizing housing conditions of the Roma communities (Rougheri, 2000), despite the adoption of a Policy Framework for Roma in 1996. In Italy the housing policy for the Roma starts with the assumptions that they are nomadic and must consequently be confined to (isolated) camps. In the 1980s and 1990s ten out of twenty Italian regions have developed legislation for the “protection of nomadic culture” by means of segregated camps (ERRC 2000, p. 11). Segregationist policies in Spain have been analyzed by Gay y Blasco (2003). In the late 1980’s Madrid authorities decided to resettle the city’s Gitano population; resettlements continued until as late as 2000. Several special colonies were built for people deemed unable to integrate into city blocks of flats; these colonies are isolated, built in places otherwise considered unfit for habitation. Although in theory they were temporary housing projects, authorities have abandoned resettlement plans even for the most desperate makeshift colonies, which lack basic infrastructure such as toilets (Rosenberg 1997). The city of Kosice, Slovakia, created a Roma ghetto of more than 4000 persons in a project initiated in 1997, by resettling Roma communities around the locality in the Lunik IX housing estate. Non-Roma residents of Lunik IX have gradually been moved out of the neighborhood, the last non-Roma family leaving the estate in 2001 (ERRC 2001). Several Czech localities also started projects of residential segregation of the Roma, adopting after 1994 the model of “holobyty”, translated as “bare flats”. Holobyty are considered housing for “socially inadaptable people” and are intended as a tool of ethnic concentration and segregation. In a study of ten holobyty neighborhoods in various localities, Roma represented 60% to 100% of all inhabitants (Zoon 2001, p. 177-181). Holobyty accommodation is usually located at the periphery of the locality, it has restricted access to utilities and expensive rents, and it entails the loss of permanent resident status of the residents. (Zoon 2001, p. 179 – 181).

Residential segregation of the Roma is not perceived to be a major political issue in Romania. Most noteworthy, the Governmental Strategy for Improving the Roma Situation (Governmental Decision HG 430 / 2001) and the National Plan for

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<sup>16</sup> Prevalence is defined by the fact that Roma pupils comprise more than 70% of the total.

Combating Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion make no reference to residential segregation. A survey of local government representatives in the field of public housing indicated that the “maintenance or creation of social mix preventing from social segregation” was considered the last priority among nine choices. The most important four priorities, in descending order, were: higher affordability of housing, accommodation for homeless people, higher housing quality, and housing provision for disabled people (Pascariu & Stănculescu, p. 275).

Income segregation often reinforces ethnic segregation, and vice-versa. In Romania, Housing Law provisions that concentrate extreme poverty in social housing estates presumably uphold ethnic segregation, since Roma people are statistically more likely to live under subsistence thresholds. Using official indicators for Roma ethnicity (a 2.5 % estimate of Roma population in Romania), the World Bank poverty assessment report (2003) concludes that: “By 2002, Romas were 2.7 more likely to be found among the poor than the rest of the population, and 5 times more for the extreme poor. Romas account for 7% of the total poor, and 12.5% of the extreme poor. In fact, three out of five Romas live in extreme poverty, and only one out of five is not poor” (Teșliuc et. al. 2003, p. 28).

Romanian social housing legislation is strictly targeting the extremely poor population. The minimal food requirements in early 2004 are approximately 985,000 lei / person<sup>17</sup>. At the same time, the minimum guaranteed income for a household comprising one person is 825,000 lei<sup>18</sup>. At present eligibility to social housing is limited to families that have incomes up to 10% above the minimum guaranteed income, and therefore a single person could apply for social housing only if her income were less than 907,500 lei. This means that in order to be eligible, applicants for social housing must have incomes lower than the minimum food requirements. Applicants that are employed in the formal sector and thus receive one minimum wage are not eligible, even when they sustain a family of three members. They are barely eligible when they sustain a family of four members<sup>19</sup>.

A special window of opportunity to prevent ethnic segregation has appeared because of recent increase of the priority of building social housing on the Romanian policy agenda. Still, the presence and negative effects of residential segregation are largely ignored in the mainstream political discourse regarding the Roma population in Romania. Case studies indicate that under current legislation and housing policies, there are considerable pressures at local level toward creating segregated housing projects for the impoverished Roma.

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<sup>17</sup> According to the World Bank report on Poverty Assessment in Romania, 2003, the minimal food needs in December 2002 prices were estimated to be 875,000 lei / person, and the severe poverty line was 1,060,658 lei / person. The inflation level from January 2004 compared to January 2003 has been 13.9 %, and food prices have increased with 12.5 % (<http://financiar.rol.ro/stiri/2004/02/127472.htm>).

<sup>18</sup> The levels of the minimum guaranteed income for families are: 2 persons – 1,480,000 lei; 3 persons – 2,057,000 lei; 4 persons – 2,547,000 lei

<sup>19</sup> In 2004 the minimum wage is 2,800,000 million lei. The minimum guaranteed income for a family of three is 2,057,000 lei, which means that the social housing income level for a family of three is 2,262,700 lei. The social housing income level for a family of four is 2,801,000 lei.

## Research data

Residents of impoverished Roma neighborhoods fear segregation because of the negative effects they may suffer as a result of labeling. They have had to face the ill fame of the neighborhood, which put them at risk of rejection from social service providers such as teachers and doctors. They had experienced discrimination due to residence especially in areas where service providers had some discretionary power – such as in accepting pupils in school, or in registering for a family doctor. Even more often, residents are met with discouraging comments related to the neighborhood they belong to.

We can also see how stigma works in practice, in the stereotypical views expressed by local authorities. Compiling a history of various examples of conflicts around housing issues between Roma and non-Roma neighbors, authorities have diagnosed a generalized lifestyle incompatibility between the two ethnic groups. This is seen as a guiding rule-of-thumb that reduces the need for an examination of particular cases and particular choices of individual residents.<sup>1</sup> This rule, if applied, decreases chances of ethnically mixed neighborhoods, acting as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Therefore, administrative discourses related to tenant distribution strategies reflect conflicting commitments, which are nevertheless strictly prioritized. At the lowest level of priority, there is a general consensus that there should be no ethnic segregation, and that, ideally speaking, Roma households that have applied for social housing should be settled among non-Roma households to facilitate integration (which is broadly construed as a civilizing process by a homogenization of lifestyles following the non-Roma patterns). Still, in the name of lifestyle divergence, there is a strong option in favor of allocating families according to their ability to maintain a certain level of housing consumption (to pay for rent and utilities expenses) and to entertain specific neighborliness practices (related to cleaning, children supervision, noise etc). Disposable resources are invoked to further narrow the array of possibilities for social mixing of residents.

Still, the case studies indicate that the same urban problem (dilapidated buildings) may be in practice approached in several ways, which are consequential on the social mix of the neighborhood and on other processes related to the quality of living. In Zăbrăuți, the main developments have included a partial rehabilitation of the dilapidated buildings and granting tenure rights for the residents. These two processes have been rather convoluted and mixed. Administrative intervention has been sporadic, amidst a general attitude of neglect. Tenure rights were granted at the same time with evictions; in many cases tenure right were transmitted (illegally) by transactions that were subsequently formalized, taking advantage of administrative chaos. As a result of tenant turnover, the neighborhood comprises tenants from all ways of life, leading to a visible ethnic and class heterogeneity. Conversely, in Piatra-Neamț, Roman, and Cluj-Napoca the dilapidated buildings were vacated. Tenants were resettled only in the first two cases, following different models. In Roman the new neighborhood is meant to work as a housing options for all evicted families from the town, which ensures some degree of ethnic mixture. In Piatra-Neamț the new neighborhood is meant to work as resettlement option for the dominantly Roma blocks that are vacated, thus leading to ethnic homogeneity.

Given the high demand for affordable shelter and the low access to housing of great segments of the Romanian population, including people who have wage incomes, there is a market pressure towards mixed neighborhoods even when the living standards in a given neighborhood are low. The case of Zăbrăuți shows that many

Romanian, wage-earning families are willing to live in a neighborhood with a majority of Roma neighbors and serious deprivation of utilities. The Roman case indicates the same demand for affordable shelter among poor Romanian families. Therefore, in order for a neighborhood to be ethnically homogenous, it requires at least one of the following: clear administrative filtering (as in Piatra-Neamț), extremely low living standards (such as the Canton neighborhood in Cluj-Napoca), or high rates of local predatory behaviors (such as in the first years after 1990 in Zăbrăuți). Therefore it follows that, given the current housing crisis conditions in Romanian localities, upholding minimal living standards and policing in a neighborhood or housing project will likely lead to ethnically mixed neighborhoods when access is open for non-Roma tenants.

### *Common utilities*

#### General Context

During communist urbanization the most frequent system of utility consumption in blocks of flats included individual meters for electricity but collective meters for heating, cooking gas, and running water. Toilet facilities were as a rule individual, except for the low comfort workers' hostels, that often had collective sanitary facilities.

After 1989 it has gradually become clear that collective meters for utilities are a source of problems. Skyrocketing utilities costs led to indebtedness, but collective meters did not allow an adjustment of consumption to individual budgets. Solutions to individualize consumption (including apartment meters, apartment heating centrals, and giving off or being cut off services) have been gradually put in place.

For buildings that accommodated extremely poor tenants, the failure of the collective meters was obvious. Raising debts with no possibility to contain or manage them meant that service provision companies often decided to cut services for the entire building, as the safest way to prevent losses. Damaged infrastructure added to the housing crisis. This is how “ghost-buildings” appeared in most Romanian cities.

#### Research Data

Accumulated debts are an obstacle in rehabilitating access to utilities in impoverished multi-family buildings (in ghost-blocks of Zăbrăuți street in Bucharest and Rovinari street in Tîrgu-Mureş). Of course, these debts are a bureaucratic fiction insofar it is virtually impossible to recover the money, and the “owners” of the debts are often anonymous (squatters, tenants who left long ago, etc). Still, they provide an excuse for service providers and authorities to dismiss any requests for utilities, since they symbolize a living proof that service provision for such impoverished buildings spells losses and is therefore impossible.

Examples of common utilities in the case studies are: public phones, electricity, water, waste disposal places, and toilets. In such cases there are no incentives for maintaining or repairing the common infrastructure. In the most unfavorable cases, the shared infrastructure is paralleled by collective payment, each user paying a fixed amount of the total consumption, irrespectively of her individual use (for water or electricity, when there are no individual meters). It is obvious that such pattern is conducive to wasteful consumption, on one hand, and to illegitimate bills, on the other

hand. This situation leads to the accumulation of debts and finally to a failure of the system.

Common toilets are a visible example of unmanageable problem, and they are highly consequential for the welfare of residents and their neighbors as well. It is of course not impossible to have functional common toilets, providing that there is somebody who is paying and taking care of their constant cleaning and repairs. Lacking this, failure is certain, as it can be seen in the dilapidated blocks in Piatra-Neamț, but also in the social housing project in Fabricii Street in Roman. On the contrary, individual toilets in dilapidated blocks in Zăbrăuți are serving the residents well. Here we can see, though, that the problem has been partially transferred to the basements, which are filled with refuse because of sewage problems.

For residents and for officials, it is all too clear that the problem is structural and not individual, and it lies with collective sanitary facilities<sup>ii</sup>. Still, officials partly blame some of the residents as unknown perpetrators, who are theoretically responsible for the damage.

### ***Limited administration***

#### General Context

Local authorities in Romania have practically discretionary power in managing social housing projects. They decide the effort and money to be spent on such projects, and they can opt for zero investment without any legal costs.

Romanian legislation does not stipulate any administration system for social housing project. Consequently, it does not specify any tenant participation requirement. The possibility of tenants' associations is mentioned in the Housing law (Art. 37) without any further details. Alternatively, owners of apartments in blocks of flats are required to associate in order to manage the building (Art. 35); the law includes detailed specifications on the functioning of Owners' Associations. Tenant participation is also predictably absent from the political agenda. A survey of local authorities has shown that tenant participation is not a priority for local authorities, being listed as the 8<sup>th</sup> priority out of nine choices (Pascariu & Stănculescu, p. 275).

It is also important to take into account the underdevelopment of the system of social work, and the lack of professional social workers (also because of the de-institutionalization of the profession during the communist period). Mayoralties employ social workers only for purposes of means testing and allocation of social benefits; there is virtually no counseling and no casework (Arpinte and Preda 2002). Social workers are, as a rule, not involved in the administration of social housing projects.

#### Research Data

The case studies indicate that management systems of social housing projects are generally underdeveloped and understaffed. They depend considerably on the personal inclinations and initiatives of public servants and on the availability of "local leaders" that can function as intermediaries.

Except for the case of the GOC neighborhood in Piatra-Neamț, I have not met any other public servant that visited and talked regularly to tenants (besides Roma experts,

who visited the neighborhoods on occasions). The world of civil servants and the reality of the neighborhoods were apart.

Social workers employed by the local authorities were the only ones visiting poor residents, because they were involved in means-testing inspections at the beneficiaries' address. Still, this type of interaction is strongly asymmetrical, and it is conducive to conflicts rather than to communication. Moreover, social workers were not involved in the administration system of the social housing projects, and neither were Roma experts.

Overall, the general orientation of the Mayors and civil servants is paternalistic insofar it is based on the assumption that residents are less than fully rational, due to poverty and lack of schooling. Because of the difficulties in communicating with residents, authorities express a strong preference to deal with local leaders and representatives instead, therefore limiting the access of residents to administrative communication.

The Zăbrăuți case study in Bucharest indicates that extensive reliance on local leaders creates risks of abuses and monopolization of decision-making. Especially in situations of discretionary administrative power, local leaders can use their access to decision makers for their own profit, while blocking protesting voices in the neighborhood. Various local leaders in Zăbrăuți have used their influence to engage in (illegal) trade with room occupancy rights. At the same time, they have managed to organize street protests, and they used their influence so that in a few crisis situations (such as prolonged lack of electricity in winter, or a wave of evictions) they solved important problems for the tenants. Some leaders used their connections to local authorities to earn a living, facilitating tenants' access to bureaucratic procedures.

Interviews with local leaders also show that their discourses reproduce all the stereotypes about the distinction between a majority of undeserving inhabitants, and a minority of "good neighbors". As residents, they are deeply embedded in the local conflicts of interests, losing in impartiality what they gain in local knowledge. Their position as intermediaries is also reinforced by this distinction that stresses their value as mediators between the authorities, and the "pariah".

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the position of local leaders in such urban marginal neighborhoods is structurally vulnerable to conflicts and suspicion. There are unsolvable crises to be addressed and conflicts to be mediated. Being close to local authorities brings suspicions of illegitimate gains and corruption. Violence, at least threats with violence, is often part of the game.

### ***Indebtedness***

The incapacity to save small amounts of money and the incapacity to make (small) regular payments for a long-term-goal and thus to defer gratification are understood by many civil servants, social workers, and other observers of the poor as signs of a pernicious short-term orientation, and even as a part of a distinctive "culture of poverty".

Indebtedness can be reframed, away from long-term/short-term dilemma, as an answer to a choice situation involving two actors: the creditor and the debtor. The situation is defined, among others, by the incentives they each have to act and the losses that each part can inflict on the other. In the case of relationships between local authorities as housing owners and tenants in social housing projects, the asymmetry of power is obvious, since tenants can incur only small losses to the state, but they face the serious risk of eviction. On the other hand, authorities may be slow to respond to

indebtedness. In such a situation, because of the uncertainty of eviction and the unpredictability of state answers, tenants are actually put in a risk-taking situation.

#### General Context

The Housing Law establishes rent levels in social housing and requires eviction for arrears longer than 3 months. There are no specialized procedures for managing individual indebtedness by counseling or rescheduling schemes.

Rent collection is a significant problem for local authorities. In 2000 cities with a population of more than 100,000 had rent arrears of 30% of gross rent rolls, and expected similar arrears for 2001 (Pascariu and Stănculescu 2003, p. 280). Because of increased housing costs, indebtedness in the privately owned housing sector has also become a significant problem, pushing the Government to issue controversial regulations to prevent evictions, transferring substantial burdens on the local authorities and on the owners' associations.

#### Research Data

Indebtedness (for rents and utilities) is a major issue in housing projects in Roma neighborhoods, limiting security of tenure and subsequently leading to problems with identity papers (such as in the Roman project).

**Table 6. Approximate rent level in case-study housing projects (Source: Interviews with tenants)**

Neighborhood	Housing type	Rent level	Social aid
Cantonului str., Cluj-Napoca	No tenancy contract (Containers)	Free use	Up to the minimum guaranteed income (MGI – see footnote 9)
Piatra-Neamț GOC	Public housing	500.000 ROL (stipulated as USD 15 on the rental contract)	Up to the minimum guaranteed income
Zăbrăuți	Social housing	60.000 ROL (USD 2)	Up to the minimum guaranteed income
Piatra Neamț Aleea Tiparului	Social housing	60.000 ROL (USD 2)	Up to the minimum guaranteed income
Piatra Neamț Str. Siretului	Social housing	98.000 ROL (USD 3)	Up to the minimum guaranteed income
Roman	Social housing	10% of social aid (USD 1 – 3) Tenants without social aid pay 150.000 ROL (USD 4)	Up to 80% of the minimum guaranteed income (the central budget provides 80% of the funds, and the local budget does not contribute the additional 20%)
Târgu Mureș	Social housing	10% din VMG (aproximativ USD 2 – 4)	Up to the minimum guaranteed income

Paying for rents and utilities is considered a civic obligation by civil servants, a proof of the understanding of their responsibilities towards society. From this point of view it is morally objectionable to pay social aid in kind. Still, this understanding of the civic nature of payments underlies a strategy of passivity and limited tolerance towards indebtedness. The most frequent policy of securing rent payments is that tenants must go and pay their rents to the administration office. If they do not pay for three months, they risk eviction. In practice, though, they are evicted after a longer period, depending on various factors (for example, whether the housing department needs the room to attribute it to somebody else). Because non-payment is only sanctioned in the long run, people lack incentives to mobilize scarce resources for rent payments.

In Piatra-Neamț the administrator has tried to reduce indebtedness by posting eviction proposals each month. Still, because rent is relatively high compared to incomes, indebtedness is also frequent, covering up to 5 months. Nevertheless, in other cases, such as Roman, or Târgu Mureș, indebtedness covers more than one year, although rent levels are considerably lower. It seems therefore that a constant pressure on rent payments helps prevent indebtedness, even if tenants are aware of the real risks

involved. The success of the local administrators in Roman in preventing indebtedness has been lower, pushing the local authorities towards taking administrative measures (refusing to renew contracts) in order to increase payments. This solution has backfired because residents without tenure contracts do not have legal ID paper and face immense difficulties in obtaining employment, therefore becoming even more impoverished and unable to pay their debts.

## **Conclusions**

A review of housing conditions and policies in Romania after 1990 indicates that poor people, including the majority of Roma citizens, face serious problems. Social housing is in very short supply, and policies to provide shelter to homeless families are slow to gain ground.

A few recent projects have brought to the forefront of public opinion the issue of housing for Roma tenants. The main risks that besiege such projects are residential ethnic segregation and administrative abandonment.

Despite a certain public awareness of its pernicious effects, residential segregation ranks low on the policy agenda, and there are virtually no policy mechanisms to monitor it or to prevent it.

Administrative abandonment is embedded in the current housing legislation and administrative practices, even when it is camouflaged by paternalist discourses. Neighborhood stigma, detached civil servants, narrowly confined social work, and reliance on “local leaders” to mediate interaction between Roma tenants and authorities are several of the factors that lead to administrative neglect of social housing projects.

Limited administration aggravates the effects of other decline mechanisms, such as common consumption of utilities, indebtedness, and predatory behaviors. The interaction of housing decline, neighborhood stigma, and administrative neglect creates a vicious circle that is particularly difficult to overcome – as many ghost-blocks in Romanian towns illustrate.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### ***Conceptual and Normative Framework***

The drifting mechanisms analyzed in the previous sections indicate that a core problem in the degradation of housing in poor neighborhood consists in the vulnerability of tenants in front of poverty and predatory behaviors, or in front of deleterious organization of consumption or administration.

I start from the normative assumption that social housing projects should incorporate the civic value of individual choice and the safety-net value of minimizing risks. The following section suggests possible policies that would prevent deterioration in social housing neighborhoods, incorporating normative requirements of resident choice and risk prevention for vulnerable persons.

### ***Preventing segregation***

Preventing residential segregation for impoverished Roma families must be acknowledged as a policy priority in national strategies for social development and in housing legislation.

Ethnic segregation in social housing projects can be diminished if housing legislation stipulates an increase in the social-housing income limit criteria to be more inclusive. Currently strict eligibility criteria put limit to the possibility of a social mix, excluding employed applicants (who are less likely to be Roma). It is therefore recommendable that the income limit for social housing applicants to allow at least families with one minimum-wage earner and one child to be eligible. This would mean an increase of approximately 25% of the income threshold for families with three members.

Quotas can be established for higher-income households in social housing projects. For example, 20% of housing units in any newly established housing project could be reserved for families that include at least one wage earner (within limits of eligibility).

In order to support families to invest in their households and in the neighborhood, social housing could allow for postponed access to ownership, for families that have been living in the apartment for a minimum period (such as 5 years).

In order to allow individual residents a choice of their housing situation, tenants in social housing projects who have lived there for a certain minimum period (such as five years) could be eligible to receive housing allowances to facilitate them access to a rented similar house on the private market. Such a measure would prevent higher-income tenants from being trapped in poor neighborhoods, while still encouraging them to live there for several years. Thus it would contribute to a socially mixed neighborhood.

### ***Preventing the tragedy of the commons***

Common utilities and common housing facilities are a major hazard in social housing projects. Project design should allow for low interdependence of residents. This can be accomplished by: 1) providing individual access to utilities, 2) providing individual meters for consumption of electricity, water, gas, other heating materials etc., and 3)

decreasing interdependence by building smaller, preferably single-storey housing projects.

### ***Calibrating administrative practices***

The main two problems that need to be addressed in order to facilitate tenant participation are the lack of specialized staff for the management of the housing projects and the risks and vulnerabilities associated with the position of “local leader”.

It is important to institutionalize a management system for housing projects that allows for a collaboration of public servants and local administrators, benefiting from the latter’s local knowledge and influence, and that includes professional social workers to deal with the problems of the residents. Social workers should be employed in the administration of social housing projects, with attributions of counseling and representation for residents. They would provide a second channel of interest representation, besides local leaders, adding possibly precious information and points of view.

The position of “local leaders” should be formalized by employing them as local administrators, with specific responsibilities for which they would be legally accountable. This can be achieved, for example, by institutionalizing tenant associations to elect a local administrator.

### ***Preventing indebtedness***

The Law of Minimum Guaranteed Income stipulates that Mayors have the freedom to organize payments of social aid in cash, in kind, or by paying for housing maintenance and heating expenses (article 28.2). Authorities should prevent insolvable indebtedness of residents in social housing projects by automatic deduction of rent (equaling a maximum of 10% of income) from social aid after a non-payment period of more than 3 months; arrear payments should be followed by a reversal to individual payments.

The same procedure of automatic deduction after a threshold of debts of several months should be applied to other housing expenses that have individual meters (electricity, water), unless the respondent opts to give up services.

The Housing Law should establish specialized counseling for managing indebtedness provided by professional social workers, within departments in charge with the administration of the social housing projects.

The administrative system should create an earmarked fund for housing maintenance and repairs, comprising a significant percentage of rent payments (such as 50%). Decision making over the use of this fund should involve multiple stakeholders, including local administrators. A visible utility of rent payments could contribute to an increase in rent collection.

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<sup>i</sup> “As you can see, speaking about adaptation, in Iași and in all other towns in Romania, when there were two or three Gypsy families in one building, in ten-fifteen years the entire building was like this: dirty; full of crooks, and bastards... People moved out because they lived in discomfort, comedy, and scandals... Because the law cannot do anything, this is the truth, people preferred to move out, and so they moved an entire building. They are a big problem, really!” (Mayor, Roman). A journalist in Cluj-Napoca had a similar process in mind: “It’s like a rotten apple, a rotten apple – a small germ, who putrefies the apple. One brings in a decently looking building two or three Gypsy families, and in two or three years all Romanians move away, or all Gypsies come there, something happens. It will not go well.”

<sup>ii</sup> One future resident of the new GOC housing project in Piatra-Neamț made clear that individual sanitary facilities are valuable: “You have your own water in your house, right? You have your toilet in your house. You clean your toilet, you consume your water, nobody comes in your house to take your water, or to go to your toilet, except for persons who are in the house. This is much better than what we had here! This is what matters most” (tenant, Siretului street, Piatra-Neamț). In Roman, a woman explained that tenants have destroyed the common toilets, but: “The mistake was that they were not built inside each apartment. It would have been my dirtiness, I would have to suffer it, not all the others” (tenant, Fabricii street, Roman).