Racialised Politics of Garbage: Waste Management in Urban Roma Settlements in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Disproportionate exposure to adverse environmental conditions is part of the complex cycle of dispossession and racial discrimination faced by marginalized minorities in Europe—primarily the Roma. The concept of environmental justice or the analysis of environmental risk along racial dimensions are largely absent from policy debates. This is a critical omission considering that the consolidation of neoliberal governance powerfully recomposes access to public services and individualizes collective responsibilities for a clean and safe environment. Driven by competitive logic, neoliberalism champions the zero-sum game where losers are either abandoned or punished by the governing apparatus. This article argues that neoliberal governance, underpinned by moral appeals and racist imaginaries legitimizes repression of marginalized groups such as the Roma. The effect is deeply entrenched environmental racism that frames Roma people as 'human waste'. The primary purpose of this paper is to fill a theoretical and conceptual gap in the literature linking environmental issues to racism.

Keywords: environmental racism, neoliberal governance, solid waste management, marginalized minorities, Roma, spatial segregation

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Table: Table 1: Main characteristics of case studies, p. 8

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Introduction

"There is a constant unpleasant smell in the atmosphere, and the air becomes unbreathable when the garbage is being burnt in the pit next to us. Both smoke and smell intoxicate us. We can't keep our windows open, to aerate the house." (ERRC, Pata Rât 2012, pg.5)

Images of Roma surrounded by piles of garbage are all too common. The majority of journalistic accounts and policy reports on Roma population incorporate photographs of dirty streets, overflowing garbage bins and dilapidated housing structures to convey a story of poverty, exclusion and discrimination. From the outskirts of Tirana and Cluj, to the city centers of Paris and Rome, the visual representation of Roma is one of dirt, garbage, and destitution. Associating Roma people with garbage has become so powerful that politicians freely comment on Roma 'dirty ways of life' and blame them for polluting the environment (Thorleifsson and Stade, 2017).

For example, in Italy, refusals to give nomadic Sinti permission to settle on private or public lands are often justified by 'hygienic reasons', because of the common perception that depicts Roma as 'itinerant dumps' (Piasere, 1991). Similarly, in Slovakia the "authorities have been targeting Romani communities for forced evictions under the pretext of environmental law" (Gokcen, 2012, n/p). In Poland, the Social Affairs Department in Wroclaw rejected Romani residents' requests to remain in the informal settlement on the grounds that the unsanitary living conditions produce an actual epidemiological hazard, and cannot be tolerated (Jupowiecka, 2016). Even the key advocates of Roma inclusion tend to reinforce this stereotype; consider an article published on the World Bank's website (see WB, 2015), with a Romani girl holding a broom in the center of the image, and a pile of garbage in the background, near her poverty-stricken house. The background, we argue, is critical to the image: it shows the dismal living conditions of Roma in Europe, characterized by segregation, poverty, and neglect.

Systemic barriers thwarting Roma people's social and economic advancement have been widely documented. Yet, while research on poverty and exclusion flourishes, the multidimensionality and dynamism of solid waste accumulation in Europe's most marginalized urban settings remains unexplored. While journalistic accounts expose discriminatory practices, including withdrawal of waste removal services and illegal dumping (Hilton, 2014; Preda, 2019, Hős utca hangjai 2019) these are rarely presented as manifestations of environmental racism. In turn, policy discourse presents the problem as a technical issue related to non-compliance with EU regulations and inadequate investment in the newest technology. Overall, the racial dimension of the problem disappears from the analysis giving the impression that accumulation of waste and exposure to pollution affects everybody equally. Subsequently, available environmental policies propose market-driven solutions which ignore the fact that racialized Romani people are forced to live in squalid and contaminated neighborhoods.

In this article, we place politics of race at the forefront of solid waste management in Eastern Europe. We argue that choosing waste sites, deciding to clean up or ignore accumulating waste reflects forms of neoliberal racialization directed at subjects whose lives are constructed as less valuable in themselves. Political construction of Roma people as superfluous, non-productive 'environmental profligates' (Krech, 1999) feeds a geography of exclusion intensifies culture of blame. In this way state's neoliberal action repertoires, underpinned by moral appeals and stereotypical imaginaries, simultaneously legitimize repression of the 'impure' subjects and relinquishment of public responsibility for their well-being. To support our claims, we present unique data collected during fieldwork in four Roma neighborhoods in Hungary, Romania,

Albania, and Kosovo[1]. The analysis of relevant policy documents, opinion surveys and open-ended interviews with key stakeholders exposes the existence of oppressive tactics ranging from 'active' neglect to criminalization of coping practices. Uniformly in all four cases, the intensifying forces of neoliberal governance contributed to the deterioration of environmental conditions, making Roma communities increasingly worse off; this article is concerned with providing evidence for this pivotal argument. Nevertheless, far from being passive victims of environmental damage, Roma residents have employed diverse coping strategies and continue to contest the status quo.

Based on this research, this article wishes to contribute to an agenda for critically needed conceptual framework and systemic research on intersection of poverty, race, and environmental injustice in marginalized urban centers. This article commences with a review of existing scholarship on solid waste management focusing on how (or whether) it reflects broader dynamics concerning environmental injustice. We then outline a theoretical framework for looking at the reciprocal relationship between forms of neoliberal racialization and environmental injustice. We then outline our methodology and present the empirical findings.

Neoliberalism and construction of "human waste"

For decades Marxist scholars have argued that the capitalist system, itself, is at the root of the environmental and social crises we now face (Golub and Townsend 1977; Harvey, 1996). A growing number of radical environmentalists also maintain that a quest for environmental justice is heavily constrained by capitalism. The profit accumulation drive prevents creation of truly sustainable solutions, which would allow a 'harmonious and respectful relationship with nature' (Bell, 2015, pg.1) Yet, at the height of neoliberal system of governance, policymakers seem determined to develop strictly market-driven solutions to an array of environmental concerns. In many ways environmental protection has been converted into a lucrative business endeavor, relying on marketized trade systems such as 'carbon market', 'pollution permits' 'climate derivatives' and 'catastrophe bonds' (Keucheyan, 2016). Accelerated privatization of public services spilt over into environmental protection and management of waste. In just a few decades, market logic penetrated even the most 'progressive' European environmental policies and action plans. Overall, all Milestones supporting Europe's transition towards a 'green economy' advance market-based entrepreneurialism and support creation of new markets in areas such as environmental pollution, and waste management. In that they reinforce deeply problematic commodification and privatization of public goods, and reinvention of environmental protection in a 'market-like' way.

Neoliberalism is a complex concept composed of ideological commitments, discursive representations, and institutional practices. One of the most renowned scholar of neoliberalism David Harvey (2007) defines it as "a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (pg. 22). In this paper we expand this definition by building on Foucault's (2008) discussion on governing rationality, which understands neoliberalism as a 'force' that 'economizes' all facets of society; both materially and symbolically. A force that transforms citizens into market actors whose only role is that of

1 Fieldwork was conducted by field researchers. The authors of this article are grateful for their work and contribution to this project.

self-investment and self-promotion. Inaptitude to do so could swiftly lead to abjection as the state washes its hands of the uncertainty generated by aggressive market competition.

While neoliberalism legitimizes withdrawal of the state from the provision of public assistance and services (including solid waste management and maintenance of public spaces) it does not render it weak. Scholars observe that far from losing its power, the state has used neoliberal rationality to reorient its goals and shed burdensome responsibilities for the poor (De Lissovoy, 2012). As argued by Wacquant (2009) the state becomes a powerful protector of private capital, supporting the extensive redistribution of income from wage earners towards firms and the affluent fractions of the upper class.

The idea that "social advancement is possibly through individual action – productivity and entrepreneurship – gains the status of a gospel effectively labelling the poor and unemployed people as lazy and feckless, not deserving to benefit from civic and human rights" (Kostka, 2018, pg.174, Bobako 2010). Cast out of the only game in town, the poor and unemployed become redundant bodies. Bauman (2004, pg. 12) reminds us that "redundancy shares its semantic space with 'rejects', 'wastrels', 'garbage' 'refuse' – with waste" and argues that "for anyone who is once excluded and assigned to waste there are no obvious return paths to a fully-fledged membership". This echoes Joan Robinson's famous conviction that "the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all" (1962, pg. 45). Those categorized as "human waste" become targets for collective fears and dissatisfaction and are subject to either intimidation and violence or 'active neglect' by the punitive state (Wacquant, 2009). In a split second, 'flawed consumers' are declared criminals who need to be 'removed' or 'contained' (Bauman, 2004).

As the responsibility for environmental protection enters the private sphere, environmental degradation is presented as the consequence of destructive consumer choices and negligence. This logic leaves little room for collective action, solidarity or far-reaching re-distribution of resources and power. What emerges is the culture of blame and criminalization of those deemed a threat to the wellbeing of abiding citizen-consumers. In this reframing Roma people emerge as a harmful surplus, and are actively pushed out of sight into the landfills, so that the state can hide its loss of control and ability (or willingness) to address poverty and deepening social inequality.

Neoliberal racialization and environmental racism

This brings us to the processes of racialization within neoliberal state. Critics have long argued that through individualisation of social pathologies (including environmental degradation) political elites can effectively deny the existence of structural racism and discredit harmful manifestations of white privilege (De Lissovoy, 2012; Leonardo 2009; Lipsitz 2006). In many ways, "neoliberalism's toleration for racialized differences in opportunity depends on its thoroughgoing commitment to understanding social problems as the effect of individual choices, within which racism specifically is seen as an individual rather than a structural problem" (De Lissovoy 2012, pg. 742, Goldberg, 2009). When policies and laws adopt a 'color blind' stance, neoliberal rationality can easily 'privatize' racism, with that obscuring any forms of systemic discrimination including access to clean and safe environment. At the same time it can penalize anyone who contests these allegedly 'race neutral' policies.

One would be inclined to hope that mainstream research on environment discusses pernicious effects racial discrimination has on the environmental justice. However, environmental historians have reflected on the crisis of racial awareness for the field, and flagrant academic color-blindness, particularly acute in Europe. As Lentin argues, "the drive to replace race with

other signifiers, such as culture or ethnicity, has done little to overcome the effects of the race idea, one less based on naturalist conceptions of hierarchical humanity, and more on fundamental conceptions of Europeanness and non-Europeanness"(2008, pg. 487). Nightingale (2012) insists that race has permuted into a largely silenced and subtle ideology of segregation in postcolonial Europe. This silence pervades policy discourse on Roma minorities, which stubbornly presents dismal living conditions as a largely technical issue related to low educational attainments and lack of participation in the labor market. While acknowledgment of discrimination has entered policy debates, it rarely extends to issues related to the environment.

Yet despite the relegation of 'race' to the past and modification (or dismantlement) of the color line, race and racial hierarchies continue to exercise a profound influence on the distribution of environmental risks in Europe. In fact, racialization of impoverished minorities serves as a tool for legitimizing discriminatory policies regarding land use, zoning, and regulation (Giroux, 2004). As a result, the racialized 'others' are more likely to live next to landfills, sewage treatment plants, and factories in conditions characterized by pollution, and what Wacquant (2008) calls "urban neglect". Bullard (1993) explored the links between institutional racism and environmental disparities in the US, and found that:

racial minorities are more likely to be exposed to environmental threats than are whites of the same social class. Race is a powerful predictor of many environmental hazards, including the distribution of air pollution, the location of municipal solid waste facilities, the location of abandoned toxic waste sites, toxic fish consumption, and lead poisoning in children. (pg. 320)

Ulezelka calls this phenomenon environmental racism, "which refers to any policy, practice or directive that causes disproportionate environmental hardship for disadvantaged groups and curtails access to a clean sustainable environment to communities based on race or colour" (2007, p. 51). Vincze (2013) writes that environmental racism not only pollutes the natural milieu but also presents subhuman conditions as a natural trait of the racialized other. As the Roma minorities need to adapt to a lower quality physical environment, environmental racism becomes a fact of life, a normalized condition not open to question. The consequences manifest themselves in acute health disparities (e.g. respiratory problems, lead poisoning) lower life expectancy (Tudor, 2018).

Neoliberal policies not only consolidate 'environmental racism' but also shift the blame for environmental degradation onto the racialized 'other'. This is part of a wider strategy to shift the responsibility for socio-economic development and the environment from the macro to the micro level. In this context, entire communities must be flexible, empower themselves, take control of their environments, and lobby urban administrations to support their informal initiatives. Failure to do so is not ascribed to systemic inequalities inherent to capitalism, but to ineffective mobilization, moral failure of individuals (or entire communities) and micro mismanagement. This, in turn, breeds a dynamic whereby racialized neighborhoods that are already disproportionately affected by environmental risks are endowed with personal responsibility over their immediate environment.

Furthermore, as the government withdraws assistance to racialized neighborhoods and their residents, it simultaneously presents them as environmental profligates, who lack environmental awareness. Harper et al. (2009) demonstrates that destitute Roma are regularly blamed for negligent environmental practices. For example, for burning household waste or forest wood to heat the house (Szelényi and Ladányi, 2006), and 'illegal' processing of hazardous materials. In short, the poor are punished for their conditions, which is the essence of how neoliberalism fails the deprived, marginalized, and neglected groups within society.

In the world of 'self-advancement' and individualization of poverty, livelihood in segregated and polluted areas is considered 'self-imposed', 'culturally driven', or 'actively chosen'. Racial or cultural affinity is conflated with unsanitary habits and polluted living environments. The majority considers the inhabitants of these areas "as a kind of 'social pollution', decreasing the well-being of those living in close proximity" (Filčák, 2012. pg. 754). This legitimizes antagonistic attitudes and regime of eviction while allowing the state to shed virtually all social responsibility for racially oppressed and impoverished groups (Kovats, 2003). Giroux aptly pointed out that "as politics becomes more racialized, the discourse about race becomes more privatized" (2009, n/p). What fully escapes the public view is that systemic segregation, with all its ugly manifestations (including garbage accumulation), is an epitome of European racialized practices.

Waste management and discrimination in Eastern Europe

In Europe, the environmental justice debate that brings to light social and racial intersections and dynamics is still in its infancy (Laurent, 2011). This debate is undoubtedly formulated in the context of social exclusion of Roma communities. There is a timid recognition that environmental policies need to espouse the principles of justice and prevent an form of discrimination or racial-bias. Paradoxically, the environmental justice framework rarely extends to issues concerning solid waste management and waste accumulation in racially segregated (or marginalized) urban areas. Neither academics nor policy experts have engaged in thorough analysis of this phenomenon. Hence, the essential links between waste and racial inequalities, between ecological and social issues are neglected. When these links are addressed, it is usually in the context of the 'developing world' (Binns et al. 2012, Kubanzaa and Simatele, 2015) under ubiquitous presumption that unjust distribution of waste along racial divisions has been largely resolved in 'progressive' European urban centers.

Although the EU Waste Framework Directive (2008/98/EC) asks Member States to "handle waste in a way that does not have a negative impact on the environment or human health" (Article 1), the focus falls on efficiency and technological innovation rather than environmental justice. Similarly, while under Article 1, 4, 13 and 16 of the WFD, Member States are obliged to establish nation-wide waste management plans, the principles of equity and social justice are not stipulated. References to the "disposal of waste" mainly concern the management and modernization of landfills, (issues of spatial and human costs in terms of equity are scarcely touched upon). While the 6th Environment Action Plan (2002-2012) has pushed the EU towards 'Green Economy', 'Sustainable Consumption' and 'Life Cycle Thinking', with an aim to decouple waste generation from economic growth (elimination of landfills, technological improvements) it fell silent on issues concerning environmental racism, dumping practices affecting marginalized areas, and unequal exposure to solid waste pollution. Although the redirection of cognitive and financial resources is desirable and much needed, it dramatically undervalues the scale of environmental racism in Europe.

The motivations behind 'Zero Waste Economy' and 'Sustainable Consumption' continue to ignore the fact that impoverished people generally consume less[2] and yet bear the brunt of the environmental hazards associated with mass production and profit driven waste management. Ironically, they are more likely to be punished by the state for allegedly irresponsible behavior – either through fines for 'illegal' fly-tipping and scrap collection or evictions and denial of

2 According to some estimates, a minority of the world's population (approximately 17%) tends to consume most of the world's resources (80%), which leaves almost 5 billion people to live on the remaining 20% (World Centric For A Better World, 2017).

services. In fact, scrap metal collection has been strongly racialized (Messing and Molnar, 2011) and conflated with an array of criminal activities[3]. Not surprisingly the EU's ambitious call for "environmentally sound re-use, recycling and recovery" penalizes informal scrap collection as well as construction of houses from recovered materials (EC, 2008).

Given this approach to solid waste management, the question of garbage accumulation within Roma neighborhoods (in fact, slums) often appears at the fringes of wider analyses of spatial segregation (see Council of Europe, 2012) and the substandard living conditions (Ringold et al., 2005; Picker 2017). Although the economic crisis spawned scholarly interests in progressively unequal distribution of risks, spatial differentiations and growing inequalities in the city (e.g., Davoudi and Brooks, 2012), few empirical studies map the scale of the problem of inequitable/racist waste management and its calamitous impact on ethnic/racial minorities. At best they chronicle instances of micro-mismanagement and non-compliance with EU regulations[4].

In conclusion, while new research pays more attention to the connection between structural factors and unequal exposure to environmental risks (Steger and Filčák, 2008; Harper et al., 2009; Filčák 2010, 2012) it still appears excessively color blind, and not contextualized within a wider neoliberal assault on social contract and just allocation of resources. Hence, forms of racialized neoliberalism with all its dynamics and hierarchies of subjugation remain underexplored and, in many ways, underestimated. To improve our understanding of waste accumulation in Roma neighborhoods, it is essential to examine forms of neoliberal racialization and their impact on the local waste management in segregated areas. A case study analysis attentive to deeply ingrained racial cleavages shows how Roma population became the designated victim of an utterly ruthless, officially sanctioned, and subsidized exploitation. It exposes the way neoliberal policies facilitate 'accumulation by dispossession' along racial lines either by removing Roma residents from 'desirable' areas or removing vital services from their delipidated neighborhoods deemed 'worthless' or 'dangerous'.

Case Studies and Fieldwork

The scale and scope of the 'garbage problem' in racialized urban ghettos is yet to be properly mapped and analyzed. The study presented in this article is a first empirical step in exposing the structural and highly racialized dimension of garbage accumulation, by. This qualitative case study research has been undertaken in four segregated and impoverished urban neighborhoods either partially or entirely populated by Romani households – Ali Ibra in Gjakove, 5 Mai in Tirana, Pata Rât in Cluj-Napoca and Hős Utca in Budapest. All four neighborhoods are marked by higher rates of unemployment than the rest of the city, few or no public services, dilapidated housing, poor sanitary infrastructures and severe stigmatization. They are all affected by garbage accumulation with three out of four neighborhoods located less than 2km from the landfills. In all aspects they exemplify what Picker (2017. pg. 2) calls *Gypsy Urban Areas* where "the fundamental principle behind the genesis and persistence of GUAs is race, in its tight connection to contemporary urban processes of economic restructuring and governance".

3 It is now a "common sense" practice to implicate Roma the moment any theft of metal takes place (Bracic, 2020).

4 In 2017, Romania was referred to the European Court of Justice for failing "to close or rehabilitate 68 illegal landfills, which pose serious threat to human health as well as to the environment" (EC 2017, n/p).

All case studies had decentralized waste management systems, with a variation of privatization: in Romania it is privatized, in Kosovo and Hungary nationalized, while in Albania we found a private-public mixed system. In all locations pro-Roma NGOs are operating, while there is a variation to the extent of mobilization, from series of protests in Romania, to limited or no mobilization in Hungary. Waste was also seen differently by locals: in all but Hungarian case study garbage was exploited as a source of income, while Albania was the only country where this activity was deemed illegal. The table below (*Table 1*) briefly summarizes the main characteristics of the case studies.

Table 1: Main characteristics of case studies

	Albania	Kosovo	Hungary	Romania
Percentage of Roma (2011 census)	0.50%	2%	3.20%	3.30%
Is waste management privatized or national?	Public-Private Partnership	National	National	Privatized
Is waste management centralized or decentralized?	Decentralized	Decentralized	Decentralized	Decentralized
Community	5 Maji	Ali Ibra	Hos utca	Pata Rat
Approx. number of residents in the community	7,000	1000	635	1500
Of those Roma (%, majority, half, unknown…)	one quarter	majority (150 RAE families and 20-30 Albanian families)	overwhleming majority	Overwhelming majority
Is it an urban or rural community?	urban	urbanizing	urban	urban
When did this community form?	1992	1960s	intervewar period and segregation continued in the `60s and '70s, then worsened during 1990s	1990s, and segregation continued in the early 2000s, 2010s
What was the reason of formation?	Migration and economic hardships after the collapse of Socialism	housing shortage	housing shortage and housing crisis of 1936, new dwellers, industrialization and elimination of Roma settlements in the countryside	impoverishment, source of income from waste, evictions
Any waste management services at the site? (local gov't/NGO administered, etc)	Yes: Eco-Tirana (Public-Private Partnership between the municipality of Tirana and AGSM VERONA) and Fusha Shpk	No: "Çabrati," the local public company doesn't operate in Ali Ibra	Yes: city and local admnistration is responsible, but not always provides services	Yes: Rosal Cluj (waste management company of Cluj Napoca)
Most important allies in the fight of environmental justice?	Romani Kham, Roma Active Albania, Roma Versitas Albania	Swiss Caritas, Caritas Kosovo, Bethany Christian Services, Municipality Office for Communities and Return	Kontúr Egyesület	gLoc (local initiative group), The Roma from Coastei Community Association
Any attempts at mobilization for environmental justice?	No mobilization, but awarness raising	No mobilization, but awarness raising	Yes: volunteering to clean garbage, with the help of local NGO	Yes, series of street protests
Do locals make a living from waste collection and recycling?	Yes, but from December 2018 this activity is illegal.	Yes	No	Yes, this is their main source of income

There were two phases of data collection and subsequent analysis. First, we have undertaken content analysis of policy documents, stakeholder reports and media coverage. The aim was to identify mainstream narrative(s) about the 'garbage problem' and examine what type of solid waste management measures and strategies have been proposed and/or implemented. In the second phase, researchers conducted surveys of local residents and semi-structured interviews with key local stakeholders. For each case study, expected survey size was N=20 for each locality, open-ended interviews were conducted with local Roma residents (N=20), with state officials (N=5) and non-state stake-holders (N=5). [5] The survey captured residents'

[5] Respondents of the surveys were predominantly Roma: in Kosovo all respondents claimed to be Roma (or Egyptian or Ashkali), in Romania and Albania every respondent self-identified as Roma and only one used a Roma sub-group as ethnic identification (Kalderash and Erli, respectively), while in Hungary the majority were Roma and several explained they were a "mixed race". We recognize the importance of differentiating between sub-groups, but for the purposes of this study, we use the term Roma to collectively refer to all groups. In the case of Kosovo, "from the 1990... Roma have divided into three self-identifying groups, Roma, Ashkali or Ashkaeli and Egyptians" (Minority Rights Group 2018). Interviews with state employees covered officials in local or municipal state administration, primarily those who are in charge of local Roma communities and waste management tasks. Finally, non-state interviewees were primarily NGO managers who were involved with assisting local Roma communities.

understanding of the garbage problem – its perceived cause, scale and impact on their wellbeing. Interviews with state employees covered officials in local or municipal state administration, primarily those who are in charge of local Roma communities and waste management tasks. The non-state interviewees were primarily NGO managers who were involved with assisting local Roma communities. The questions sought to generate factual knowledge about the living conditions in the neighborhoods and available waste management services, and institutional interactions. Efforts were also made to inquire about stakeholders' perceptions of the effectiveness of the existing approaches.

The timeframe of this study covers the last 20 years; we made a conscious choice to focus on the period following the regime change in the region. While historical perspective would surely allow for even stronger articulation of the role neoliberal rationality plays in accelerating impoverishment and racism, a regime comparison is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, stakeholders' reports do demonstrate that the intensification of the neoliberal governance in the region, mainly privatization of public services including waste management, has coincided with deteriorating living standards for many Roma communities (FRA and UNDP, 2012). Surveyed Roma all observe that their neighborhoods are slowly deteriorating. In the uneven post-socialist geography of Eastern Europe, Roma people consistently came out as the 'losers' of transitions. Our research confirms that the construction of Roma as an unadaptable social pariah normalizes their appalling abjection.

Case Study Findings: A Short Analysis

In all four localities piles of garbage are a permanent feature of the scenery. Over the last decade, waste removal companies responsible for these areas have either reduced their services or ceased to collect rubbish altogether. Some neighborhoods are so malodorous that the residents cannot open their windows and must keep their kids inside to prevent the pong penetrating their homes. The stench is aggravated by rotting garbage from nearby landfills, and in the case of 5 Mai in Albania there is even open sewage. Poverty and marginalization prevent many residents from introducing even minor improvements to their dwellings. While many younger respondents 'dream' of moving away, for the majority the neighborhoods are the only home they have ever known. "I fear for my children's health here, but this is home where else should I go" (interview#1, 5 Mai, 2019).

Pata Rât, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Cluj-Napoca, a cultural capital in western Romania, and Ali Ibra, in the historical city Gjakove in southern Kosovo, are both located on the steps of open landfills. In both localities, Roma citizens are the majority (see Table 1). The leaks and fumes from the overflowing landfills pollute the water, soil and air. All the environmental surveys of Pata Rât, and the adjacent areas conclude that it is a "degraded environment, improper for human life" (Popita, 2012, pg.103; ERRC, 2012). Not surprisingly, many activists call these neighborhoods environmental time bombs.

In 5 Mai, a neighborhood in Tirana, the capital city of Albania, Roma people also constitute a majority. The neighborhood is known as 'Roma ghetto within a ghetto' where around 430 destitute Roma families live in makeshift housing without proper building permits and basic utilities. Over the years the area became to be used as a dumping ground by nearby businesses and recycle companies with dubious operation permits. Community workers lament that 5 Mai is on the brink of disaster, as hungry Roma children search for food amidst heaps of toxic waste. In the block of flats on Hős utca, near the center of Budapest, residents mainly identify as mixed-race. The building is carefully hidden from public scrutiny, fenced off and enclosed within an industrial complex. The street became known as a dangerous 'no-go-area'

(Wacquant, 2008) effectively stigmatized and excluded from a vibrant city life, residents are also surrounded by garbage, which is mainly concentrated in courtyards and around the building. There are distinguishable piles of garbage under windows as well – with garbage rarely removed, residents have begun to simply throw out their waste from their windows.

Paradoxically, all these segregated and polluted neighborhoods are located in otherwise thriving cities with high aspirations of becoming cultural and tourist centers in their respected countries. Yet, our research exposed a perversely common practice of ignoring Roma neighborhoods. while the existing National Waste Management Strategies all promise to "improve regulation and control of all waste management operations and to develop separate waste management and recycling systems in urban neighborhoods" (KIWMS, 2020),[6] any improvements made are distributed unevenly and often according ethnic and racial lines. In addition, Roma residents tend to be excluded from planning committees and municipal decision-making forums, and in some cases even from clean-up programmes organized by civil society. For example, the 2017 'Clean up Tirana' initiative evaded all areas inhibited by Roma, areas that would probably benefit the most from the clean-up. In all four countries legislation clearly identifies state authorities as responsible parties for waste management. Similarly, surveyed residents and interviewed stakeholder confirmed that implementation of national waste laws is patchy and highly uneven. One resident observes: "we are all slowly dying here, but they [the authorities] don't care, they treat us bad, our homes are garbage sites for them, they always put money somewhere else, away from us" (interview #5 Ali Ibra, 2019).

We further found that privatization of waste management has in fact worsened sanitary conditions in Roma neighborhoods. With the onset of mass privatization in the mid-1990s, the state began to rapidly 'contract out' a growing volume of the functions it previously performed (Hamm et al., 2012). Abandoned by the state, those functions became a playground for unregulated market-forces and supply chains full of rivalries among buyers and sellers whose interests were often at odds. The drive for profit making and the siphoning of public budget into private companies cut off poorest neighborhoods from regular cleaning services. We also found that services provided by private companies are generally more expensive. This supports existing research that shows that within the working of public-private partnership, "public concerns take a backseat to profit-making interests" (Hermann, 2007, p. 66). In Kosovo for example, the Law on Waste stipulates budgets for establishing a waste management system for their respective territory, however municipal waste collection, transport and disposal are not provided to all on an equitable and sustainable basis. According to a recent report by Institute for Development Policy (Musa, 2018), the system now in place is characterized by low collection coverage, with only 75% of urban areas receiving regular collection service. Tendered clean-up companies either insist that Roma settlements are not on their service maps or insist that some areas are inaccessible or dangerous. A community worker of Ali Ibra stated, "the trucks only come to collect garbage before the elections but soon after the services disappear" (interview #6 Ali Ibra, 2019).

And yet, it is the residents that are blamed for the unsanitary and unsafe living conditions. Shaming and othering of Roma became an ideological tool for legitimizing the renouncement of public responsibility for the wellbeing of the urban poor but also for hiding the incompetence and failure to address the waste problem. The media fuels the issue by commenting on Roma 'dirty ways of life' and blaming them for 'trashing the nation'. As one community volunteer from Kosovo stated "Roma are treated badly so nobody wants to do anything about the stench and toxic waste laying around (…) but surely, they are ready to write up fines if Roma try to collect any scrap materials, calling them thieves" (interview #6 Ali Ibra, 2019). He asserts that

6 Kosovo Integrated Waste Management Strategy 2020-2029.

Roma people are accused of being "dirty problematic neighbors" who do not care about their own neighborhoods and in fact pollute other areas as well.

The Hungarian case also revealed that the municipal authorities responsible for the waste removal and clean-up services simply withdrew their services from the "Gypsy quarters". To legitimize this abandonment, the authorities insinuate that the residents do not care for a clean environment and this serves as a pretense to penalize those neighborhoods that do not meet the expected standards and fail to mobilize or empower themselves. To demonstrate this attitude, below is a quote from a letter by Kőbányai Vagyonkezelő Zrt, a municipally owned company responsible for providing cleaning services to the Hős utca block, our case study from Hungary:

"I respectfully suggest and request that in the future [the residents of Hős utca 15) focus their public efforts on keeping the common areas of the property and the immediate surroundings of the property tidy, that is to say, in the direction of developing an systematic attitude among residents to keep cleanliness and maintain order (Hős utca hangjai, n.d.)."[7]

Association of Roma with dirt underpins the pernicious system of forced evictions that pushes out 'problematic subjects' out of the city centers. Amnesty International for years have been calling out the damaging effect force evictions have on the poorest people. Barbora Černušáková, Amnesty International's expert on Romania agrees that "Legislative flaws allow local authorities to sweep away long-established Romani communities entirely and relocate them to inadequate housing, out of sight of the rest of the population, under the pretext of 'inner-city regeneration' and 'development'" (AI, 2013a, n/p). She also insists that such evictions not only generate trauma but cause further marginalization and exclusion. A resident of Pata Rât asserts "The government pushes people into the landfills to make space for lucrative deals, after all you cannot develop a city with dirty Gypsies inside" (interview #10 Cluj-Napoca, 2019). Perhaps one of the most unjust evictions of Roma people took place in Cluj-Napoca. Amnesty International (2013, pg. 6) documented that on 17th of December 2010, the authorities illegally evicted 270 Romani people from their residence of over two decades on Coastei Street in the centre of Cluj-Napoca. Without official explanation the families were moved to Pata Rât, a neighbourhood located near the city's largest open landfill. Although massive efforts were taken to protest this decision, and the courts deemed the eviction illegal, the Roma families are still residing in one of the most polluted areas in the country (Mazaud, 2019).

Our research reveals just how strongly neoliberal governance bounds Roma people to garbage –practically and symbolically. For years, the post-communist governments were not incentivized to develop sustainable waste management infrastructure (see EC, 2017b). Waste was either disposed of in the already overflowing open-landfills or processed for free by the poor. For the impoverished and marginalized Roma, waste picking was often the only available source of livelihood. The privatization of landfills and recycling plants made life for Roma even worse. Left to the vagaries of powerful entrepreneurs, the poorest Roma entered fierce market competition with no adequate tools or legislative protection. Without formal contracts, fair pay or protection against hazardous waste, Roma (including children) work "informally" to survive, helping to separate materials for the lucrative scrap materials sector. Their undocumented work is either ignored or equated with theft and profiteering. As one resident explains, "the moment you say you live in Pata Rât nobody will give you another job, so you do this one and pray to make ends meet and not be called a thief" (interview #11 Pata Rât,

7 This letter was a response to a local NGO's request to clean the area or, alternatively, provide support to locals cleaning efforts in supplying cleaning supplies and garbage containers. What is evident from this response is the perceived uselessness, or even counterproductivity, of cleaning poverty-stricken areas, where presumably residents do not care for a clean environment.

2019). In Kosovo, scrap collection became outlawed, taking away the only source of income for many, and in fact pushing Roma further into the realm of the 'black market'.

Yet Roma over-representation in a hyper-precarious sector is stubbornly framed in terms of choice rather than dire necessity. The majority of interviewees working for the authority or even local NGOs imply, albeit implicitly, that Roma choose to live close to the landfills and are reluctant to search for jobs and better housing. Their racialized status of the 'other' renders them undeserving of state protection or assistance and marks them as a burden on a deemed non-racial and non-threatening economic order. "The people become dependent on the state support and we need to break this dependence" exclaimed a community worker (interview# 12 Pata Rât, 2019). "Roma people could do more but they like the flexibility scrap collection gives them" explains a community worker working with children obviously not aware of the hours and risk scrap collection entitles (interview#2, 5 Mai, 2019). In line with neoliberal rationality (that penetrates even the well-meaning NGO sector), the most marginalized people are expected to seek individual solutions to structural problems, as assured by interviewed project manager "the first thing we need to do is change people's mentality and get them off benefits" (interview #14, Pata Rât, 2019). In fact, the omnipresent discourse of 'choice' and 'merit' conveniently obscures power asymmetries and systemic racism towards Roma people. At the same time, the neoliberal notion of a level playing field allows the state to withdraw assistance from those unwilling to 'self-improve' or benefit from opportunities provided by allegedly 'all inclusive' liberal markets.

The emphasis on Roma idleness and over-dependency has successfully eroded the solidarities with the poor but also among the poor. In all the localities, the communities struggle to come together and conflict often ensues, usually along income lines. The data clearly shows that neighborhoods succumb to the zero-sum logic, with the financially better off residents (usually those with stronger connections to the city), distrusting their more impoverished neighbors and vice versa. The divisions and internal bouts are exacerbated by dwindling and erratic public assistance. As one scholar and activist explained, "the way authorities deliver support puts these communities in competition with each other" (interview #14 Cluj, 2019). In many ways, divisive social assistance is more about policing a certain model of individualism rather than human welfare. It could be argued that it prevents people from lapsing into collectivity.

In Hungary's Hős utca settlement authorities offer trivial pretexts for not removing waste: if garbage containers are not placed in a designated place, then the garbage will not be emptied and waste will not be removed. The superintendent is usually charged with the task of placing containers in the designated area, but there is no superintendent at the Hős utca settlement, so garbage is not removed. Ironically, for the 2017 ad-hoc reactive garbage removal the municipality spent 23 million HUF (79,500 USD), while the salary of the superintendent would have been 2.5 million HUF annually (approx. 8,600 USD). A volunteer for a local NGO at Hős utca is convinced that blatant racism is partially to blame for the accumulated garbage and lack of regular waste collection (interview # 16 Budapest, 2019). In general, interviews with Hős utca residents about the 'garbage problem' were permeated with feelings of deprivation, vulnerability, and sense of abandonment. Overall, it is clear that garbage removal—a necessary mission of the state in the interest of the entire community and everyone's well-being—became a privilege, a tool of exclusion and a technique of 'othering' by the neoliberal state.

The most alarming impact of environmental racism we observed was the conversion of Roma neighborhoods into dumping grounds where everybody feels free to dispose of garbage in front of people's houses. The most acute example is Ali Ibra, as it effectively became a notorious 'sacrifice zone', converted into a dumping site, where illegal garbage burning generates

irremediable health risks. As one resident bluntly put it: "Kolonia[8] is the dumpsite of the entire city" (interview #8 Ali Ibra, 2019). The genesis of the problem lies in the disastrous political decision to designate Ali Ibra as a Transfer Station, where municipal waste is amassed before transfer to the nearby landfill in Landovica. Allegedly a temporary solution to problems arising from decentralization of waste management services generated diabolic living conditions forcing those unable to leave to adapt to abject and hazardous environments.

A resident claimed that "Ali Ibra has been turned into a garbage destination(...)for citizens, restaurants, construction companies and so on" (interview #7 Ali Ibra, 2019). He insists that smaller private companies servicing most affluent neighborhoods (often those that house international aid workers and UN staff) regularly dump trash in Ali Ibra despite not having permits. This case clearly revealed that profit-oriented neoliberal logic with which waste management operates does not prioritize human well-being; in an interview, the head of one of the municipality offices claimed that "the municipality needs to have a long-term solution for private companies that operate in Ali Ibra and are interfering with the transfer process for their benefits" (interview #18 Ali Ibra, 2019). Another interview with a leading position in a publicly owned company in charge of waste management also confirmed that private companies are "benefiting from the situation [of waste accumulation]" (interview #9 Ali Ibra, 2019).

In a similar manner, 5 Mai also became a place for dumping unwanted waste by those unwilling to pay disposal fees. Restaurant owners and construction companies openly unload their trash in the area. One business owner from the area even insists that it is "good for the Gypsies because they can recycle it and sell it" (interview#3, 5 Mai, 2019). At night, the area transforms into an informal incinerator; residents confirm that trash burning is a nightly occurrence: "They come at night, we don't know who they are, but rumors say that they are private people who burn toxic waste that they can't process in their recycle plants" (interview #4, 5 Mai, 2019). And while Albanian Ministry of Environment, Forests and Water Administration insists that the country conforms to the targets set by the EU, research stubbornly shows that despite considerable expenditures cleaning services are managing increasingly less waste (Kodra and Milios, 2013).

Overall, the research clearly exposed an appalling situation of neglect and environmental racism in all four countries. We found that most top-down frameworks—whether at the level of state, municipality, or the EU—had little effect in reality, given that their implementation was either inefficient or completely ignored. Although official documents tend to emphasize a "better quality of life for all citizens," environmental justice is rarely prioritized. Tenaciously, economic efficiency and political commitment to continuous growth take precedence over ecological sustainability and equal access to clean and safe environment.

Not surprisingly the legislative changes to environmental laws provide only ambiguous solutions to persistent inequalities in service provisions and a pernicious tendency of driving the unwanted facilities (e.g., landfills, sewage treatment plants) toward the most vulnerable groups and impoverished neighborhoods. The environmental needs of low-income and minority communities have yet to be fairly addressed.

Conclusion

In summary, we highlighted in this study that racializing and excluding tendencies of contemporary neoliberal states extend to areas such as waste management. Accumulation of waste and complete disregard of the hazards it causes to the nearby residents clearly reveals

8 Ali Ibra is also known as Kolonia.

the existing power hierarchy within Western liberal society, where Roma are placed at the bottom. With this, as we showed, the social contract binding the citizens to the state is tipped in the favor of the state, reducing the responsibilities of the state towards the most deprived, yet strengthening the state's authority over its subjects, who increasingly rely on outside intervention to make their living conditions bearable. Those unable to fend for themselves, are not only pushed out of sight, but are also disciplined by the state. All in order to protect the free market and entrepreneurial interests.

We showed that the association of Roma with waste follows a rather problematic rationale: wide-spread discrimination of Roma and seeing the group as dirty wrongly legitimizes the unequal burden of waste and pollution they are forced to live with. Associating Roma with waste, in other words, allows the society to treat them as scroungers and an economic burden for the society. Consequently, racialization of underprivileged minorities becomes a tool for legitimizing discriminatory policies regarding land use and waste management. Furthermore, it allows the state to shrink government services, re-allocate or simply shed all responsibility to provide basic needs for the poor and marginalized groups.

We also concluded that there is little understanding and appreciation of the complexities of environmental racism that Roma face. In fact, the most recent report by European Environmental Bureau confirmed that Roma neighborhoods are increasingly more excluded "from access to clean and safe water, adequate sanitation and/or waste collection" (Heidegger and Wiese 2020, pg. 4). Even more importantly, there is little interest in solving the maladministration of waste management (or complete neglect of it) in poor Roma neighborhoods, even if the consequences of waste accumulation are more expensive and severe for both, local Roma and the broader society. Regulations at any level—local, national or the EU—are not effective since they are seldom implemented. We thus suggested that issues concerning environment and waste must be re-considered from the perspective of justice, not only sustainability.

We carried out empirical work in Roma settlements in selected European urban areas understanding exploring how and why the state (or local authorities) neglect Roma by either refusing to remove waste or using their living spaces as dumping sites. In the future, we plan on expanding this research in order to understand to what extent national or local mechanisms of racial environmental discrimination are different or similar, and, importantly, we plan on examining how this discriminatory "politics of waste" is mitigated by either Roma themselves, or charities and various organizations. We consider environmental racism in the context of neoliberal policies one of the most pressing issues that scholarship has barely touched on.

In addition, we also recognize the significance of the proposed argument for global debates. Internationally, trade in waste is flourishing, comfortably lodged inside the uneven flow of global capital. The globalization of waste disposal effectively means that capital accumulates in wealthy parts of the world, while waste accumulates in the poorest regions. "With over 90% of waste openly dumped or burned in low-income countries it is the poor and most vulnerable who are disproportionately affected" (WB, 2018, n/p)". In the future, we wish to extend our research and examine the global implications of neoliberal waste policies.

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