

### Roma: the Outskirts of Wastelands In Romania

Imagine a country in which there are two groups of people. One group has access to education, healthy living conditions, and economic mobility, while the other is forced to work menial jobs in unstable environments on the outskirts of society for the benefit of the first group. On the surface, such a scenario sounds dystopian or historic, like something our modern world could never picture. Unfortunately, most countries experience this divide, though on a much more complex scale than what is described above. Romania is no exception. For a country that views itself as a unified front, as one people, the smaller minority factions within are left to dry in the dangerous grips of climate change. One such minority group is the Roma, otherwise known as the Romani, who have been systemically oppressed for centuries since their migration into Europe. Though much of this oppression still continues today, many European countries, including Romania, present a front of anti-discrimination. But despite Romania's mythic belief that racism doesn't exist within the country, there are still many factors that continue to prevent the Roma population from reaching the same political, social, and economic heights as the majority population within Romania (Anti-Roma Racism). Through various environmental policies, especially to do with landfills, water, and air pollution, the Romanian government continues to drive the Roma to the outskirts of society. Despite many attempts by the European Union to prevent the settlement of polluted areas and to close down landfill settlements, many of Romania's worst polluted districts are reserved for minorities like the Roma. In this way, the Roma people are forced to live in unsafe conditions while the majority population can claim non-racism, as the displacement of the Roma is viewed as a mere economic issue, rather than a race one (Odobescu). Thus, environmental policy within Romania not only designates the Roma population to toxic waste sites and landfills, but segregates them from the rest of the population,

hiding them away from tourists and more developed areas (Rorke). The following paper will discuss the intricate interplay between the Romanian government's environmental policies, and the oppression, displacement, and erasure of the Roma people and their experiences, and how this erasure prevents them from reaching the same heights as other people in Romania.

Before delving into the intricacies of environmental justice in Romania, it is important to grasp Romania's overall history. The Eastern European region has always been plagued with war, and Romania's antiquity is no exception, as the region itself was wrought with battles between the Dacians and Romans, with Rome eventually occupying the area, leading to the inevitable Romanization of the entire region that would be known as Romania (Romania, Britannica). This early portion of history with the Romans capturing the region would lead to the modern Romanian belief in their white Roman ancestry, a belief that potentially contributes to the subtle racial hierarchies we see today. Such Roman influence also led to the adoption of Christian Orthodox beliefs, which almost 87% of the Romanian population still hold today (European Commission). Jumping much later into the region's history, after occupation by various peoples like the Huns and Russians, the Ottoman Empire controlled much of the area, while the people of Moldavia and Wallachia continuously fought for independence. Finally, in 1862, both Ottoman principalities were united under one name: Romania. However, it wasn't until 1877 that Romania officially declared independence from the Ottomans. The historical effects of pre-independence and the hard-fought battles within, can still be seen today in how the Romanian people separate themselves from other nations and peoples (Office of the Historian). Since the Roman empire, the Romanian people have struggled against various invaders like the Huns, and have been displaced from their own land multiple times, which has lead to modern-day Romania's strong identity in their own land and race, as it is something they've

historically fought for (Romania, Britannica). Thus, the combination of a rich racial identity that is directly tied to land, race, and a Christian Orthodox religion, creates the perfect environment for racial discrimination against groups that have migrated to Romania, such as the Roma people, who moved into Eastern Europe from India.

From anti-semitism, to eugenics, to participation in the holocaust, modern Romanian history is wrought with instances of oppression against minorities who don't align with Romania's white Roman identity, and remnants of such discrimination still exist today (Kelso). In almost all spheres, from income, to poverty, to education, to sanitation and life expectancy, Roma perform worse than the majority populations of the rest of the European Union, with no notable progress over time (Ciaian, 1). Despite the EU's attempts to improve policy regarding the Roma, discrimination against them still rears its head in socio-economic spaces, especially those outside of their own communities, further preserving the divide between Roma and non-Roma groups (Ciaian, 13). And while Romanian policy improvements attempt to remedy these racialized practices, a study done through Loughborough University shows that racism doesn't just permeate Romanian culture, but infects the very legislation meant to fight against discrimination. The study analyzed various Romanian government documents centered on Roma inclusion, examining both their strategies and rhetoric. Though more modern policies abandoned direct implications relating to negative Roma stereotypes, even the most recent document still subtly aligned itself with racist language and morality (Popoviciu, Tileagă 27). In essence, while overt racism is rejected within these policies, the moral implications of these racialized beliefs still persist, but in a subtle way that is difficult to spot and challenge (Popoviciu, Tileagă 28). These policy practices contribute heavily towards racial hierarchies, as the continuous discriminatory culture surrounding the Roma is exacted by the government into social,

economic, and educational spaces, even through legislation that is meant to rectify racial tensions. Thus, the racism perpetuated by both the government and majority population not only affects the Roma people individually through political and social barriers, but prevents the population overall from breaking into the same economic echelons as other groups, creating a society in which the majority race is consistently held above the Roma.

In the same vein as subtle racism, it is important to acknowledge the myth of color-blindness that allows Romania to deny its political and cultural racist undertones. While racism in Romania is a well-established phenomenon in the academic sphere, the Romanian government continues to perpetuate a color-blind narrative to the wider social sphere as seen in the aforementioned policies. Such a myth only bolsters the idea that Romania needs no improvement in terms of racism, which allows for the continuation of racist rhetoric. Even as recent as 2003, Romanian authorities denied that the Holocaust took place in Romania, despite the hundreds of thousands of Roma and Jews who were executed by the Nazi regime on Romanian soil (Kelso). Denial and erasure only leads to repeating history, and the avoidance of proper solutions. As established in the study done by Loughborough on Romanian inclusion policy, overt expressions of discrimination have now been replaced by insidiously hidden rhetoric that still bolsters the overall narrative against the Roma people. For example, the Loughborough study finds that much of Romanian policy continues to associate Roma with crime, and views the population as a whole as holding values contrary to popular society (Popoviciu, Tileaga 11). Thus, it is important to recognize that racism in Romania is live and well, and simply ignoring race is not a solution to systemic and cultural perpetrators of racial discrimination. Instead, the color-blind myth, which is unfortunately seen in all Romanian policy, only continues more subtle forms of racism, further marginalizing the Roma people.

Directly tied to Romania's race problem are its various environmental issues. Romania has struggled with water and air pollution, in addition to a large waste management problem, especially since the industrial age. And despite policies meant to combat such issues, Romania continues to wrestle with the consequences of climate change and environmental damage. Because Romania imports waste from all of Europe, both legal and illegal landfill dumps, have become a major issue for the country, especially as areas once occupied by people are now permeated with pollution and trash (Iordache). Out of all Romania's municipal waste, over 90% is relegated to landfills, while only 6% is recycled, in comparison to the European Union's average 38% landfill and 25% recycle rates (Lacoboaea). In addition to landfills, Romania also struggles with air and water pollution. In Romania, around 25,000 deaths a year are caused by air pollution, and Romania's pollution index has been steadily climbing since 2016 (Iordache). Clearly, Romania has a problem with waste disposal and pollution, as landfills grow, and more people are relegated to live in unsafe areas. Hence, landfills and municipal waste deposits not only affect Romania's natural resources and ability to grow agriculture, but directly impact people who live in waste-ridden areas, especially those of lower economic status.

In a country so fraught with both racism and environmental detriments, the unfortunate outcome is that of environmental injustice, in which the Roma bare the disproportionate burden of Romania's environmental problems. The very conception of Romanian environmental policy, much like the rest of Europe, is inherently flawed in how it views marginalized groups. Much of Europe's environmental policy is based on a neoliberal lens, which relegates race to be a private issue, ignoring how systemic implementations also contribute to environmental injustices (Dunajeva, Kostka 4). For example, instead of encouraging policies that focus on environmental justice, the EU's Waste Framework Directive focuses on technological innovation, ignoring how

industry and policy can negatively harm minority groups (Dunajeva, Kostka 6). Thus, public policy in Romania is based on competition, and ignores groups that were never qualified to compete in the first place, like the Roma, who have been generationally oppressed. As a result, the Roma are more likely to live in conditions characterized by poor sanitation, pollution, and municipal waste due to land use and zoning policies that seem benign on the surface (Dunajeva, Kostka 5). However, the best way to grasp the level of racism found in Romania's environmental policy is to look at the disproportionate effects pollution and landfills have on the Roma. Not only have Romania's environmental policies not aligned with the EU's standards, but they've directly harmed and held back the Roma population within Romania. One of the most famous instances of environmental injustice is the Pata Rat landfill, which contains almost 1,500 Roma settlers, many of whom were forcibly relocated to the dump in 2010 (Petrescu-Mag 6) (Environmental Justice Atlas). Not only is the landfill vulnerable to various environmental hazards like fires, air and water pollution, soil contamination, and waste overflow, but the health impacts on the Roma people include disease, malnutrition, radiation exposure, and death. And these are just direct physical affects. The larger socioeconomic implications include a lack of work security, increased crime, and displacement, all of which have decimated Roma communities who are far more likely to be designated to polluted areas (Environmental Justice Atlas). Ultimately, Romania's failure to address environmental justice is two-fold: policies that ignore environmental injustice through a neoliberal privatized lens, and policies that actively relegate minorities to unfavorable areas. Such discrimination not only prevents the Roma from living healthily, but completely erases their experiences as they are pushed to the worst outskirts of society.

To address the aforementioned issues with Romanian racism and environmentalism, we must first examine Romania's current environmental policy. Though current legislation is not perfect by any means, some effort has been made to align with the EU's environmental standards. Part of Romania's effort against landfills includes prosecuting those who run illegal landfills, which are a common problem plaguing many parts of Romania. In just 2020, fifteen illegal landfills were prosecuted, which is a start to the regulation of landfills and pollution within Romania (Iordache). However, while the Romanian police and prosecutors continue to catch those running illegal landfills, the government has also begun to tackle the environmental issues outlined by the European Union. Currently, the EU encourages sustainable innovation and development through voluntary private sector means and wider organizations, which aligns with the previously mentioned dysfunctional neoliberal lens, while also fostering education and environmental responsibility (Funaru 43). Romania's government, which has created policy in alignment with the EU's standards, has attempted to coordinate to these standards most notably through its Clean Romania Program. Initiated in 2002, Clean Romania takes a three-pronged approach: resource management, education, and waste management (Funaru 45-46). However, the groups associated in enacting this plan are mostly industry-based, which could potentially ignore minorities who aren't at the forefront of these larger corporations and organizations. Similarly, another piece of environmental legislation, The National Action Plan for Environmental Protection, focuses more on industry and implementation of projects, rather than environmental justice (Funaru 46). While the Clean Romania Program fosters some hope through its educational plans, many of the improvements settled by the government rely on industry and corporate endorsement and implementation, and may erase the more essential humanitarian aspects of environmental protection and preservation needed by the Roma people.

More flaws can be found in Romanian environmental policy when delving into Romania's overall government mechanics and lack of Roma representation. The most obvious problems with Romanian environmental policy is its failure to reach the EU's environmental standards, as the establishment of unilateral policy is particularly difficult (Bodislav 312). However, upon deeper analysis, Romanian policy doesn't simply lack efficacy in terms of numbers and statistics, but also in terms of diversity. As of 2003, only 2 out of 485 members, or 0.4%, of Romanian parliament, the branch of the government responsible for passing legislation, were of Roma descent, despite the Roma occupying almost 9% of Romania's total population (Brown 7). Evidently, there is a lack of Roma representation within the government, despite many policies negatively disproportionately impacting the Roma. But when the government is so heavily dominated by the majority population, there is no incentive to bring minority concerns to the forefront, further contributing to environmental injustice faced by the Roma people. This lack of representation in combination with a neoliberal myth that policy should be based upon a capitalistic principle that everyone is on equal competing ground, creates the perfect framework for ineffective and discriminatory practices that erase the experiences and suffering of Roma, who have less competing force both socioeconomically, and politically. If the Roma people are to be cared for, there must be someone within the government pushing for their voices to be heard, and for their suffering to be seen.

Though a solution to all of Romania's problems with environmental justice would be extremely complex, and would likely require overhauls of various government programs, there are some remedies that can kickstart the beginnings of change. The widest net of solutions that can catch as much policy within its bounds would be to encourage more education and anthropological study, and to hire and elect more Roma people as employees of the government.



Knowledge is a valuable weapon by which change can be exacted, and the Romanian government can rectify the state of the Roma by endorsing knowledge collection. However, instead of simply examining the statistics of rainfall, pollution, and temperature, anthropological studies focused on people should also be emphasized. An important element in understanding how to best help the Roma is by extending beyond headlines and political debate, and into the perceptions of the very people living and breathing within these unsanitary environments (Crate 90). By highlighting experiences of people who live in these communities, who understand how the land changes, and how the environment impacts their well-being, policy-makers can better grasp exactly what their legislation may affect. By emphasizing scientific and anthropological studies on how the climate affects people, the government can more accurately tailor policies that fit its citizens' needs in terms of the environment. Thus, in addition to promoting more Roma to run for government offices and hiring more Roma government employees, studying the Roma people directly is a good start to a much larger and comprehensive solution.

As has been established, Romania still struggles with various environmental concerns that are only perpetuated by the country's disregard for certain groups of people, especially the Roma. While policy that only addresses environment is somewhat effective, the true underlying issues cannot be fixed upon the backs of Roma erasure and oppression. Throughout this paper, it has been found that not only is racism still very potent within Romanian culture and policy, but that even legislation meant to fight discrimination still holds subtle forms of racial aggression that then influences the Roma in a broader cultural scheme. Environmental legislation also does not properly address the more humanistic side of environmental policy, and instead, benefits those who are already at the peak of society, rather than those most affected, like the Roma. Furthermore, the discrimination present both in ordinary and environmental legislation has lead

to both physical, mental, and economic risks for the Roma people, who are trapped in an endless cycle of environmental peril. The implications of such research means that the Romanian government can no longer ignore racism within its own ranks, and must focus on underlying issues that reinforce discrimination. Additionally, instead of putting a band-aid on environmental issues by storing waste in specific minority areas, the Romanian must prioritize solutions that benefit all members of society, and thus, benefit the environment as a whole. However, despite recent improvements, Romania itself is still a fairly new country, with old historical roots. The question of how to change the cultural stigmas surrounding the Roma people still persists, as cultural prejudice reinforce prejudice policies, and prejudice policies reinforce prejudice cultural beliefs. Ultimately, the vicious cycle will continue until the Roma people are accepted as Romanian by the wider public, and when people finally realize there is no group deserving of displacement into life-threatening environmental conditions.

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