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# **(Im)mobilities and Informality as Livelihood Strategies in Transnational Social Fields**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter explores the relationship between (im)mobility and informality by analyzing how informal practices evolve when people migrate and move within transnational social fields. The livelihood perspective allows us to analyze informality and (im)mobility as strategies that individuals and households perform to make a living, including the role played by institutions. The chapter shows that transnational migrants learn how to navigate and exploit formal rules to get things done by adapting their informal practices to the new context following two parallel processes: informalization and formalization. On the one hand, adapting informality entails learning the unwritten rules and selecting, preserving, and adjusting some informal practices while abandoning others, primarily illegal, illicit, and harmful. On the other hand, the formalization process involves adopting the formal rules of the new context, especially those about the residence and work permits. Thus, transnational networks and geographical mobilities allow migrants to exploit the grey areas of various formal systems that come to contact in making a living.

## **1. Introduction**

Mobility and informality have become popular concepts in the social sciences as a way of attempting to grasp the complexity of cultural practices in everyday life. First, the “mobility turn” (Sheller & Urry, 2006) put the movement of people, things, and knowledge at the core of the social research agenda, encompassing the mobilities associated with migration and transnationalism (Salazar, 2019). Second, “informality”, understood broadly as the aggregate of practices that bypass the regulations of states and their institutions (Polese, 2021; Routh, 2011), is a global phenomenon that inherently co-exists with any formal system to “get things done” (Ledeneva, 2018; Polese, Williams, Horodnic, & Bejakovic, 2017). However, as the precise practices are culture-specific (Ledeneva, 2018; Lomnitz, 1988), we [33] can expect the informal practices that individuals employ to evolve when they migrate to a different cultural context. Despite this, the connection between transnational mobility and informality has hardly been explored in the literature on informality. Therefore, in this chapter we explore the relationship between informality and the mobilities of Romanian migrants in Spain, analyzing how their informal practices evolve when people migrate from one cultural context to another.

The connection between informality and migration was first established by Keith Hart, who investigated the informal activities of illiterate, unskilled migrants from rural areas of northern Ghana in Accra (Hart, 1973). Hart is frequently credited for having pioneered the first typologies of informal economic activities (Ledeneva, 2018) and for coining the term ‘informal economy’ as the ensemble of productive activities outside the ‘organized labor force’ (Morris & Polese, 2014). Hart’s work also shows that both formal and informal activities were part of migrants’ mobility and immobility patterns –

hereafter (im)mobilities – which were facilitated by their social networks, based on kin ties and ethnic membership.

Since then, migration scholars have focused on the relations between undocumented migrants and their employment in the informal sector (Baldwin-Edwards & Arango, 1999; Berggren, Likić-Brborić, Toksöz, & Trimiklinotis, 2007; Likic-Brboric, Slavnic, & Woolfson, 2013), on transnational entrepreneurs able to obtain a competitive advantage by relying on informal economies and networks (Portes, Guarnizo, & Haller, 2002; Turaeva, 2014), and on transnational practices of resistance to state control (Garapich, 2016). Furthermore, scholarship on informality has paid attention to informal border-crossing practices such as smuggling and trafficking (Bruns, Miggelbrink, & Müller, 2011; Kalir & Sur, 2012; Schendel & Abraham, 2005) and the shadow economies of migrant workers in post-socialist contexts (Cieslewska, 2014; Urinboyev & Polese, 2016; Yalcin-Heckmann, 2014).

However, academic contributions exploring whether and how individuals' informal practices evolve when people migrate from one cultural context to another are scarce. The 'sedentarist metaphysics' (Malkki, 1992) that identifies the relationship between peoples and places usually through migrants' countries of origin and destiny or that focus on informal exchanges *within* physical borders has been dominant so far (Bruns & Miggelbrink, 2012; Spyer, 1988). When people move between [34] cultural contexts, the informal practices that they learned may not work or become superfluous in the new context, while new needs, opportunities, or limitations may arise. Besides, transnational migrants are not confined to a single nation state (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), but live at the crossroads of two or more nation states, influenced by multiple sets of laws and institutions (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), which implies they navigate different "mobility regimes" (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), as well as different administrative,

legislative and cultural systems. Consequently, their informal practices to “get things done” may also respond to or exploit more than one formal system.

In this chapter we adopt a livelihood perspective, which sees both transnational migration and informal practices as strategies that households employ to make a living. This perspective suggests that, for households, the two complementary activities have the common goal of reproduction. Moreover, we assume that migrants contribute to the creation of a transnational social field (hereafter TSF), i.e. the networks of personal relationships that extend across national borders “through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1009). TSFs may start as nothing more than networks of personal relationships, but the migrant enclaves at the destination may gradually attain an “institutional completeness” (Breton, 1968) reproducing the institutions of society at large. In this case, the emergence of Romanian welfare organizations, political organizations, cultural associations, churches, schools, language classes, newspapers and transport companies in Spain catering specifically to the needs of the migrants (Molina, Martínez-Cháfer, Molina-Morales, & Lubbers, 2018). Thus, the TSF perspective helps us identify three types of interdependent actors (migrants, return migrants, and Romanians living in Romania) and allows us to explore the agency of household members in the context of collective and institutional processes.

In sum, this chapter poses the research question of how do the informal practices of Romanians evolve in the process of their migration to Spain, whether individually or collectively? This approach focuses on westward migration and mobilities from Romania to Spain, extending previous accounts of “transnational informality” in post-socialist spaces (e.g. Urinboyev 2016), and enhances our understanding of the relationship between informality and mobility. [35]

The data presented in this chapter are based on a research project<sup>1</sup> that analyzes the TSFs created by Romanian immigrants in Spain. To investigate their livelihood strategies, we used a mixed-methods approach combining a binational survey<sup>2</sup> ( $N=303$  for the field connecting Dâmbovița to Castelló de la Plana) with ethnographic fieldwork. The survey inquired about migration and mobility trajectories, family situations, formal and informal economic activities – e.g., remittances, flows of goods, work contracts – homeownership, and social networks. It was conducted between November 2017 and July 2018 in Spain (Castelló de la Plana) and Romania (Dâmbovița), using a novel sampling methodology called ‘binational link tracing’ (Mouw et al., 2014), a technique closely related to respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn, 1997, 2002). Also, after administering the survey to respondents, the interviewers wrote brief field notes highlighting ethnographic information on people’s livelihood strategies that have complemented the survey data. In addition, between 2017 and 2020 we conducted multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork (Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995) in Dâmbovița and Bistrița-Năsăud (Romania) and Castelló de la Plana and Roquetas de Mar (Spain). The ethnographic fieldwork consisted of a combination of four methods: (1) participant observation in the daily activities of churches, associations, and companies, as well as carpooling trips with Romanian migrants to and from Romania; (2) dozens of informal interviews with migrants, politicians, and

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter we present data from the first phase of the ongoing ORBITS project, “The Role of Social Transnational Fields in the Emergence, Maintenance and Decay of Ethnic and Demographic Enclaves”, funded by the Spanish government (MINECO-FEDER-CSO2015-68687-P). In the second phase of the project, we are studying a second TSF field between Roquetas de Mar (Spain) and Bistrița-Năsăud (Romania). Quantitative data from this second phase it is not included in this chapter. More information: <https://pagines.uab.cat/orbits/en>

<sup>2</sup> The sample includes three types of respondent: Romanian citizens currently residing in Spain ( $N = 147$ ), Romanian return migrants living in Romania ( $N = 19$ ), and non-migrants living in Romania ( $N = 138$ ). In Castelló, 73% of the respondents were female, while gender was more equally distributed in Dâmbovița (with 47% females). Respondents’ ages varied from 19 to 72 in Castelló, with an average of 43 years, and between 18 and 75 years in Dâmbovița, with an average of 36 years. In both places, about a quarter of the respondents had post-high school and higher education.

religious and community leaders; (3) four focus groups on informal practices (three with Spaniards on informal practices in Spain, and one with a Romanian family living in Spain to identify and list [36] informal practices in both countries); and (4) ten semi-structured interviews with Romanian migrants about informal practices. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed and all the participants in this research have signed informed consent forms. The results presented in this chapter are based on these data.

The chapter is structured as follows. The following two sections discuss the theoretical intersections of informality, transnational mobilities, and livelihood strategies, as well as providing a brief overview of Romanian migration to Spain in general and to Castelló de la Plana and Roquetas de Mar in particular. Thereafter, in Section 4, we propose a schema of the adaptation of informal practices by TSFs based on our findings and state our expectations. In Sections 5-7, we present our results on how informal practices change during different phases of migration. Finally, we conclude with some findings on the adaptation of informal practices as an overture to our future research on the topic.

## **2. Informality and (im)mobilities as livelihood strategies in transnational social fields**

Livelihood strategies are the repertoire of economic and non-economic strategies through which people strive to make a living (De Haan, 2012), a notion that extends to both informal practices and mobilities. Informal practices, defined as “regular strategies to manipulate or exploit formal rules by enforcing informal norms and personal obligations in formal contexts” (Ledeneva 2008:119), penetrate all aspects of public life globally, including economic, social, and political practices (Polese, Morris, & Kovács, 2016). They are embedded in market exchanges, but also in non-economic dimensions



such as non-profit activities and in exchanges within personal relationships (Ledeneva, 1998). Their pervasiveness suggests that they are adopted irrespective of the economic circumstances of citizens or countries (Morris and Polese 2014: 14). Ledeneva stresses the importance of unwritten rules, or “the know-how needed to ‘navigate’ between formal and informal sets of constraints” (2011: 722). Informal practices vary across time and space, responding to cultural, political, [37] and economic transformations (Ledeneva, 2018; Yalcin-Heckmann, 2014). They are also embedded in grey zones “associated with in-betweenness, liminality, marginality and ambiguity” (Ledeneva 2018: 2), as they are “neither hidden nor fully articulated” (p. 11).

In this chapter, we study informal practices within the TSFs through the personal relationships that migrants maintained with one another and with non-migrants in Romania. The TSF concept allows empirical research not only on individual responses and migrant processes, but also on the collective and institutional responses to mobility regimes (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) that are constituted by existing regulations, institutions, and infrastructure (Baker, 2016) and that either limit or facilitate (im)mobilities, depending on the power relationships within a social field (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). From our perspective, mobility within a TSF is not just an individual but a household decision that is also driven by ties beyond the household that follow the chain of migration (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964), as the costs of migration fall with each new wave. Network externalities start to emerge once a certain lower threshold of migrants is reached, which includes a growing institutionalization in the TSF. Moreover, specialized roles can emerge of immobile people who coordinate and optimize mobility across the field (Bashi, 2007; Dahinden, 2010; Molina, Petermann, & Herz, 2015).

Although the vast body of literature on informality acknowledges its ubiquity, it is mostly based on evidence from post-socialist countries, the Global South, and developing countries. In Western Europe informality has been studied less often than in post-socialist countries because it is embedded in formality in more complex ways there (Morris & Polese, 2014). Thus, the focus on livelihood strategies and TSFs allows us to analyze the complex processes of both formalization and informalization (Boudreau & Davis, 2017) along with the phases of Romanian migration in Spain. The purpose is twofold. On the one hand, it allows formal and informal labor practices to be re-examined as an overlapping continuum that goes from formal employment to self-provisioning (Williams & Onoshenko, 2014), performed as forms of either resistance or exploitation (Round, Williams, & Rodgers, 2008). This phenomenon can be explained by the decline in formal employment and the process of informalization of previous formal relations (Likic-Brboric et al., 2013; Williams & Onoshenko, 2014). Trying to find comparative dimensions of informal economies in the UK, Pahl suggested the expression ‘forms of informal work’ (1990) to describe productive activities that are embedded in social relations, using [38] the household as a unit of analysis to include the domestic economy as the locus on both formal and informal sources of income (Martinez Veiga, 2005; Molina & Valenzuela, 2007; Pahl, 1984).

On the other hand, as developed in section 4, informal practices are culturally dependent and migrants might learn how to get things done at a migrant destination and along TSFs. Thus, migrant adaptation to informality is a process of learning the strategies, mastering the practices, and developing the relationships required to manipulate or exploit the formal rules and context of a given destination.

### **3. Overview of Romanian Migration to Spain: The Romanian Enclaves of Castelló de la Plana and Roquetas de Mar**

One consequence of European integration is the growing number of European Union (EU) citizens who live permanently in a different country than where they were born. In 2017, 19.3 million (Eurostat, 2018b) of the approximately 500 million inhabitants of the EU were living in another EU country, of whom roughly nine million are EU citizens of working age who are active in the labor market (Fries-Tersch, Tugran, Ludovica, & Harriet, 2018). The post-socialist states are particularly active as sending countries: Romania and Poland are the largest sending countries in the EU, with more than three and two million intra-EU emigrants respectively (Eurostat, 2018b).

In Romania, the transition to the market economy has deepened the subalternization and fragmentation of labor (Kideckel, 2008; Verdery, 2009), which has increased poverty and unemployment, reinforced informal activities as survival strategies (Ciupagea, 2002; Neef, 2002), and pushed people to move abroad (Marcu, 2009; Sandu, 2005). In contrast to migrants from other east European countries, the main internal European destinations for Romanians are Italy<sup>3</sup> and Spain, which also speak Romance languages and have a relatively low cost of living.

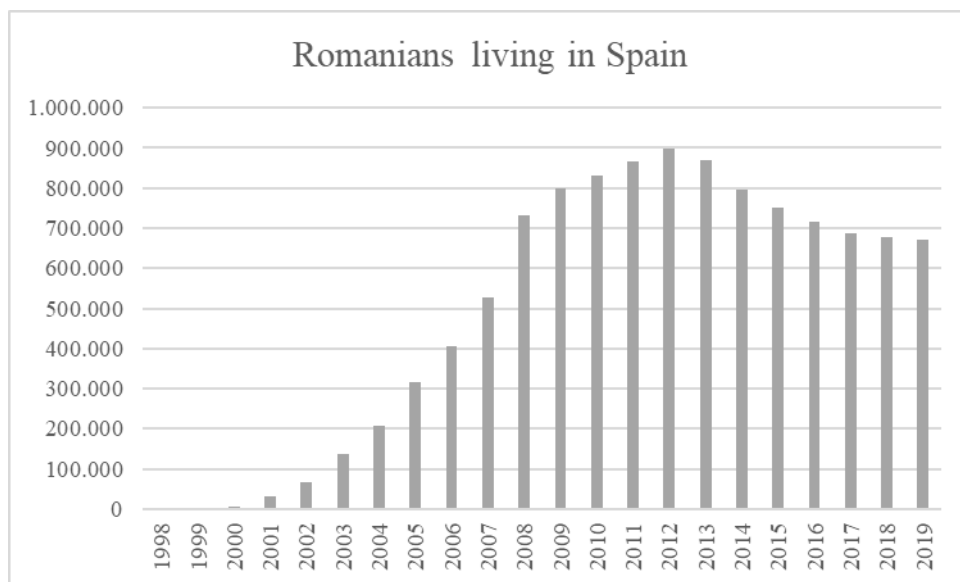
The first phase of Romanian migration to Spain comprises the period between the first arrivals at the beginning of the 1990s and the lifting [39] of visa requirements in 2002, which smoothed movement within the Schengen area. The second phase was a transitory period between 2002 and the entry of Romania in the EU in 2007, when Romanians could live legally in other EU countries, but still without the legal right to work (Marcu, 2009). The third phase stretches from 2007 to today and consists of circular migrations, with a young generation of highly skilled Romanians who are

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<sup>3</sup> For a description of the formation of the transnational social spaces of Romanians in Italy, see Remus (2008).

willing to work abroad within the EU and are considered ‘mobile European citizens’ (Marcu, 2015).

Over these years, the Romanian population in Spain increased sharply, from a few thousand in 1998 to almost 900,000 in 2012 (see Figure 1, National Statistics Institute 2020), when it became the largest foreign population in Spain. Although the economic crisis of 2008-2014 drove many Romanians back out of Spain, they continue to be the second-largest foreign population, with 671,985 Romanian nationals living in Spain in 2019 (INE, 2020).

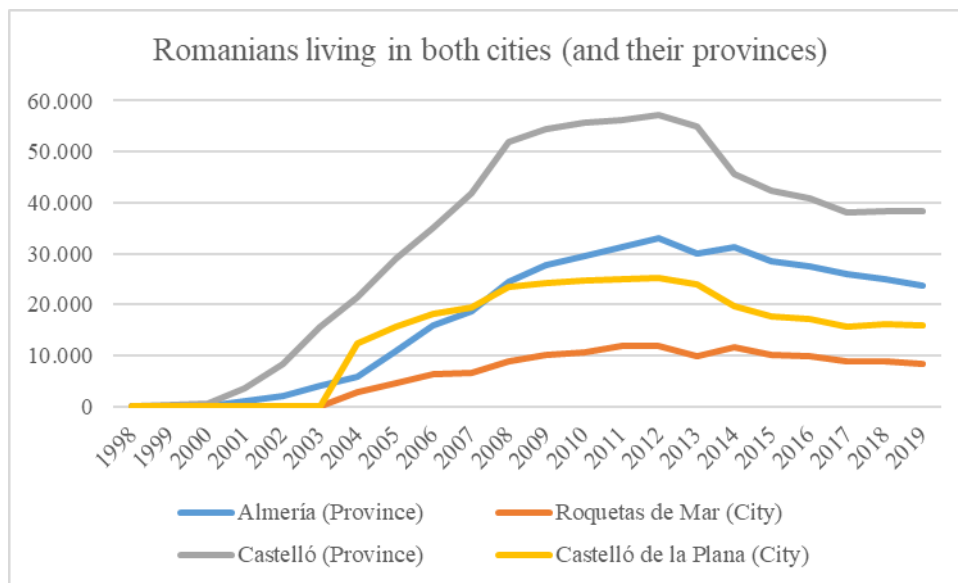


**Figure 1.** Population with Romanian nationality in Spain. Own elaboration based on the Padrón continuo. October 21, 2020. [www.ine.es](http://www.ine.es)

Romanians were attracted by the expanding labor markets, both formal and informal, and were supported by social and religious migration networks (Bernat & Viruela, 2011; Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009; Marcu, 2009; Molina et al., 2018; Paniagua, 2007) [40], as well as by the growing institutionalization resulting from these networks (De Haas, 2010). Geographically, the Romanian population is not homogeneously distributed, but rather forms demographic enclaves within Spain where the percentage of Romanians is

particularly high. The Mediterranean cities of Castelló de la Plana and Roquetas de Mar are paradigmatic Romanian enclaves.

At the start of fieldwork in Castelló de la Plana in 2017, the number of inhabitants of Romanian nationality accounted for 15,748 out of the total population of 169,498, or roughly 10% of the total population of the city (INE, 2020). Many of them came from a bounded geographical area in Romania: Dâmbovița, a county northwest of Bucharest. The development of this migrant enclave is described elsewhere (Molina et al., 2018). In the case of the city of Roquetas de Mar, in 2017 the total population accounted for 93,363 inhabitants, of whom 24,948 (27.3%) were of foreign nationality, including 8,939 Romanians. This means that Romanians are by far the largest population of foreign nationality (35.8% of all foreigners) and 9.5% of the total population (INE, 2020), many of whom come from Bistrița-Năsăud, a county in Transylvania, Romania.



**Figure 2.** Population of Romanian nationality living in the Spanish cities of Castelló de la Plana (capital of Castelló province), and Roquetas de Mar (in the province of Almería). Own elaboration based on the Padrón continuo. October 26, 2020. [www.ine.es](http://www.ine.es)

These migration corridors, from Dâmbovița to Castelló de la Plana and from Bistrița-Năsăud to Roquetas de Mar, constitute TSFs where people's permanent and temporal mobilities are facilitated by transnational networks of kinship, friendship, and acquaintanceship, as well as regular channels of communication, through which people move, and goods, services, and information are exchanged.

#### **4. Informality adaptation: a schema of informal practices and transnational migration**

During the socialist period in Romania, instrumental social relations were necessary to overcome scarcities, obtain access to good quality services, or resolve legal issues. Despite the fall of socialism, informal networks and practices are still fundamental to obtaining access to education, health, business, and the labor market (Stoica, 2012). In this context, neo-liberal reforms amplified the competition for scarce resources, increasing the inequalities of power in patron–client relations in basic sectors such as the health-care system (Stan, 2012). In Romania, the “widespread networks of personal exchange and favors [similar to Russian *blat*] have been ‘*relatii*’ (relations), ‘*cunostinte*’ (acquaintances), and ‘*pile*’” (Stoica 2012: 173), where *pile* – or ‘*A avea o pilă*’– refers to connections that can smooth [41] things out.<sup>4</sup> As Ledeneva shows (2018), the instrumentality of sociability exists with similar patterns under different names all over the world.

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<sup>4</sup> “Romanians joked that the acronym for the Romanian Communist Party (Partidul Comunist Român, PCR) stood for ‘Props [or Files], Acquaintances, and Relations’ (or ‘*Pile, Cunostinte si Relatii*’ in Romanian)” (Stoica 2012: 172).

In Spain, the informal practice of using social networks to get things done is called *enchufismo*,<sup>5</sup> translated directly as “to plug in” (*enchufar*), a figurative way of denoting the practice of “pulling strings”. The verb *enchufar* means “to give a position or appointment to someone who does not merit it, through friendship or political influence” (RAE, 2019), while *enchufismo* has been defined as “political and social corruption” (ibid). It is nonetheless common practice within the endogenous Spanish labor market and in Spanish politics, providing opportunities for corrupt practices. No fewer than 40% of the Spanish population finds work through [42] informal channels of relatives, friends, and acquaintances, a much higher percentage than in northern European countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, or Finland (e.g., Pellizari 2010, cited in Vacchiano et al. 2018). Thus, as our participants noted, the Romanian term “*avea o pilă*” translates directly, both in theory and everyday practice, as to have “*enchufe*”.

Other informal practices taken from Romania have been adapted to the destination context in Spain, a country with a large tradition of informality already. For instance, Pitt-Rivers’ ethnographic investigation in the 1950s showed how people from a Spanish village made a living relying on undeclared crops and illegal trade (Pitt Rivers, 1971). Benton demonstrated the relevance of off-the-books workers in industrial development in Spain after the dictatorship (1990), a practice that has lasted until today (European Commission, 2014). Informal economies in Spain have been reported in mining (García, 1996), industry (Narotzky, 1988), agriculture (Du Bry, 2015; Martinez Veiga, 2005), and of course domestic service (Viruela, 2013), among other sectors. Indeed, the

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<sup>5</sup> Also, *amiguismo*, which “indicate(s) a specifically instrumental use of friendship ties” (Giordano, n.d.: in Ledeneva 2018, 102).

pervasiveness of the hidden economy in Spain is estimated at 23% of national income or 6% of GDP lost to the exchequer (Lago, 2018; Serrano & Gadea, 2005).

A good practical example of informal work practices in Spain is making *chapuzas*, meaning minor repairs, especially if done shoddily, for which undeclared workers are often hired. Romanians are well known in Spain as *manitas* (handymen) who perform good work cheaply. The worker does not declare the work and the client does not pay 21% VAT, a practice called “to pay in *B* or *en negro*” (“in black” or *la negru* in Romanian). In many cases, the line between informal and corrupt practices is blurred, and the importance of corruption as a subcase of informality (Baez-Camargo & Ledeneva, 2017; Polese, 2021) should not be underestimated. Indeed, any casual conversation with Romanian migrants in Spain easily includes strong criticism of “Romanian institutions and politicians because of corruption” (Paniagua 2007: 167), which is sometimes pointed out as one of the reasons for leaving – and/or not returning – to Romania. When people are asked about specific cases of corruption, the replies are unclear but sometimes distinguish daily informal practices in making a living – e.g. informal bribery of civil servants, known as *mită* or *șpaga*, that is, to have to pay a bribe to obtain access to health services (Stan, 2012) and the diversion of public resources by rent-seeking political and economic elites. For example, one research participant stated that [43] “we have the most expensive cost per kilometer of the highway in Europe because of corruption”,<sup>6</sup> a view confirmed in a report<sup>7</sup>.

According to Zerilli (2005), there is a naturalized and stereotypical view of corruption associated with Romanian-ness that is grounded in the rhetorical devices of history – the Ottoman legacy, the influence of communism, and/or folklore – which is

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<sup>6</sup> A middle-aged man who has lived for more than twenty years in Spain. Unrecorded informal interview, 19.08.2017.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.consiliulconcurentei.ro/uploads/docs/items/bucket8/id8693/raport.pdf>



used as “passive resistance” to the unwritten rules of the system, spoken about with irony and jokes, as a form of resistance by the powerless (Scott, 1985). Similarly, the stereotyped vision of corruption in Spain is commonly associated with the term *picaresca*,<sup>8</sup> which refers to taking advantage of others – or exploiting the formal system – for one’s own benefit. This is also an (uncritically) naturalized cultural characteristic of Spaniards that includes several informal practices such as *gorroneo* (Fradejas-García, 2021a), *chanchullo*, or *triquiñuela*, among others.

Both countries' populations also have in common higher perceptions of corruption than other EU countries. The 2017 Eurobarometer report indicates that Romania (68%) and Spain (58%) are at or near the top – first and third respectively – in the EU whose respondents say that they have been personally affected by corruption (European Commission, 2017). For our research participants, the main difference is that practices of informal governance are being prosecuted in Spain,<sup>9</sup> even forcing some politicians to resign, while in Romania this is still unusual. As one interviewee stated, the Romanian population “do this precisely because politicians do it, they already grow up in a culture of robbery. Well, if the president of the government does it, why shouldn't I make a living<sup>10</sup> as [44] well?”<sup>11</sup>. This top-to-bottom continuum of corruption was also described as a survival strategy by another participant:

People have to do whatever it takes to eat. And if you have a measly salary you have no alternative: people are not going to rob a neighbor, put their hand in his

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<sup>8</sup> In the sixteenth century, so-called picaresque novels depicted a rogue and or anti-hero overcoming the daily life struggles of poor people, wheeling and dealing by creative tricks. Nowadays, this old literature genre coexists in Spain with the Spanish picaresque as a cultural set of deceiving practices.

<sup>9</sup> In 2018, a case of political corruption forced a change of government in Spain after a motion of censure (El País, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> In Spanish, ‘*buscarse la vida*’ means to do whatever is necessary to survive in a limited situation.

<sup>11</sup> A 24-year-old man who migrated to Spain with his family when he was seven. Recorded focus group, 19.06.2019.

pocket. But someone who can use his/her job to complete his salary is going to do it, and I see that as legit. (...) They have to survive: if you limit them to a miserable salary, obviously corruption will continue to exist at all levels.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, some exchanges that political sciences and economics would see as corruption are interpreted by participants as legitimate (Polese, Kovács, & Jancsics, 2016). Romanian migrants learn very quickly which practices are not welcome, less explicit, or less accepted in Spain.<sup>13</sup> For instance, overall informal practices like attempts to bribe police officers or making informal economic exchanges to obtain access to public resources are not just illegal but are deemed unacceptable by the local population, which may limit its use to dealing with Romanian compatriots or institutions transnationally. Moreover, the experience of learning how informal governance and informal practices of corruption among public servants, politics, and economic elites<sup>14</sup> function in another country produces a reconsideration of the harmful consequences of diverting public resources. Young migrants who came to Spain as children are very clear about this, as in this example:

In the end, you enter a dynamic as a whole loop. Because you are paying that money to the police and not the state (...) you cannot improve the service. So, you think that the service is crap and to be better served you [45] pay. But then we enter the same thing again. And if you don't get out of the loop, you never end.

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<sup>12</sup> A middle-aged woman who has lived in Spain for more than twenty years and is very well-connected transnationally. Recorded interview, 03.03.2020.

<sup>13</sup> This comparison entails ambiguity, since informal practices are more primitive in post-socialism (I pay to get access to a service) and more subtle in neoliberalism (I buy private insurance to get access to a service). We thank Abel Polese for suggesting this insightful distinction.

<sup>14</sup> Poenaru argues that mass mobilizations against corruption in Romania at the beginning of 2017 (e.g. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/01/romanians-protests-emergency-law-prisoner-pardons-corruption>) have made politicians synonymous with corruption while business practices have been exonerated (2017).

(...) [T]hat's it, [when visiting Romania] I'm not going to pay a policeman, or a doctor or anything.<sup>15</sup>

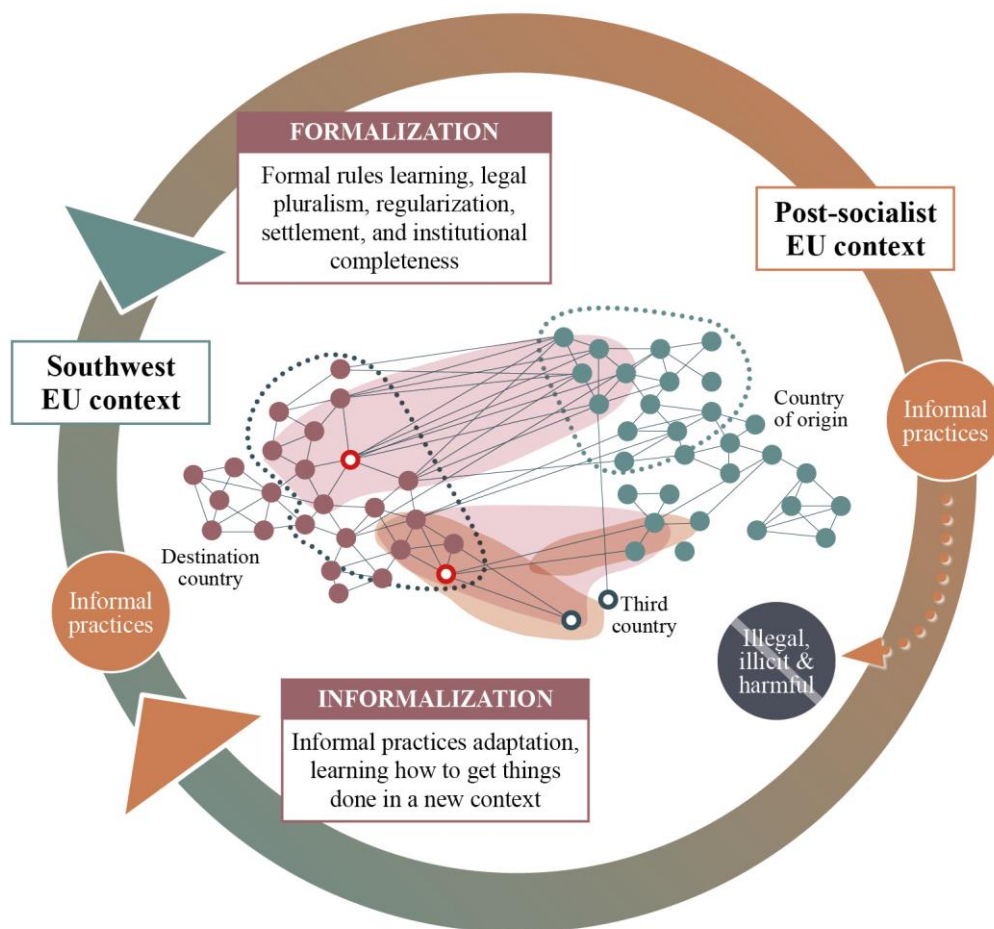
In this framework of how migrant adapt to a new context at both the individual and community levels, we contend that selected informal practices that exist in the (post-socialist) sending country are preserved and adapted during the process of migration, while other, mostly illegal, illicit, and harmful practices are abandoned (see this book's introduction). Indeed, transnational migrants also learn to deal with almost two-state legal systems in a co-existence of laws defined as “legal pluralism” that may include others such as customary laws or religious laws (von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann, 2016). Thus, some of the practices that are maintained may be used without changes between individuals of the same nationality across the TSF, whereas others may be adapted to the local context of the destination (see Figure 3.).

A constitutive aspect of migrants' socio-cultural adaptations and livelihood strategies is learning the local formal rules that are part of the formalization process, as well as the unwritten rules and informal practices that provide contacts and facilitate access to employment, work and training opportunities, schooling, health-care, economic investments, or housing, among others. Indeed, the actor's strategic actions and behavior are guided by a toolkit composed of a repertoire of habits, skills, and styles (Swidler, 1986), but that also needs adaptation to the new cultural milieu in which the old and the new contexts coexist in a TSF. As Ledeneva puts it, following Wittgenstein, “certain mastery and expertise can only be achieved by dealing with constraints in practice” (Ledeneva 2011: 722).

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<sup>15</sup> A 24-year-old man who migrated to Spain with his family when he was seven. Recorded focus group, 19.06.2019.

Thus, from a livelihood perspective, we would expect that migrant households adopt informality when their access to legal residence, employment, and housing through formal channels is restricted. We would further expect them to rely on compatriots in the first phase after migration, when the migrants lack contacts with the indigenous population at the destination, but they can gradually incorporate Spanish contacts that can prove to be instrumental as well if they simultaneously learn the unwritten Spanish rules of informality. From the TSF perspective, we would expect that the informal practices adopted by migrants [46] are diffused socially through networks and that migrants can mobilize local contacts, as well as people in the country of origin (e.g., for the construction of a house in Romania, for entrepreneurship), to get things done.



**Figure 3** Schema of adaptation: informalization and formalization in a TSF between post-socialism and southwest EU.

Higher institutional completeness in the TSF can compensate for restricted access to formal channels in Spain and thus reduce informality, but it can also introduce more informality into how migrants deal with these institutions. In this latter case, as the institutions come from the same cultural context, we would expect certain practices to be imported from the country of origin without major adaptations, though some settled migrants are critical of such naturalized informal practices. [47]

The next three sections present the results from our fieldwork, showing how formal and informal activities and transnational mobilities intersect as livelihood strategies easing the settlement process of low-income migrant workers and shaping the demographic enclaves and the TSFs that connect specific regions of Spain and Romania.

## **5. Informal (im)mobilities of Romanian migrants in Spain**

The vast majority of the first Romanian migrants who arrived in Spain before 2002 used mafia-like networks to facilitate cross-border travel and documents, paying around \$1,000 for a tourist visa, as our respondents stated, and in line with previous research (Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009; Paniagua, 2007). The majority of the 147 Romanian migrants we interviewed in Castelló de la Plana indicated that they knew someone in the city before they came to the town, but only 3% had an informal labor contract in Spain before they arrived. After arriving in Spain, they overstayed their visas and remained in the country undocumented. The penalty for overstaying a visa was an entry ban of five years for the whole Schengen area. Consequently, some became stuck in their destinations because of the costs and risks of returning to Romania, while others

developed various travel strategies, such as paying bribes at border controls or changing their travel routes, to avoid the ban (Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009).

During this phase of migration, as happens in many cases of migration (Mahler, 1995; Menjívar, 2000), some were supported by informal networks of other Romanians who had settled before them, but many others were left on their own by their contacts. Some were forced to scavenge and to live in abandoned houses, train stations, or squares. After the difficulties with travel and arrival, many respondents indicated that they started to work irregularly<sup>16</sup> without a residence permit until 2002, when the visa requirements changed and the costs of migration fell, opening the door to migration by people without the capital and/or social networks previously required (Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009). [48]

The entry of Romania into the EU in 2007 eased access to formal labor markets within the Schengen area and facilitated transnational mobilities. It also increased Romanians' mobility capital or "motility", a term defined as the capacity and potential to be mobile within a social field (Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004). Cheap flights started to replace the two-day bus trips between Romania and Spain, although the fares for the latter are still very low – most affordable one-way ticket cost €69 in 2020. The appearance of numerous formal and informal Romanian road transport companies since the end of the 1990s in Spain favored the arrival of more Romanians, as well as an informal influx of products from Romania to Spain and vice versa – in the beginning costing merely €2 a kilo – some of which are handmade, as well as unlabeled food and alcohol (Petrescu & Rodriguez, 2006). This flow of products for trading, gifts, or self-consumption continues and is now even cheaper at €1 a kilo in 2020, facilitating social

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<sup>16</sup> As some of our research participants stated, the informal economic practices of using the permits and working papers of another person, lent to a friend or family member, or rented for approximately €150 per month, were common at that time.

remittances that reinforce transnational relations (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011) and transnational networks of trust (Tilly, 2007). In many cases, things, documents, and money, normally small amounts of cash, are sent via the international passenger buses that ply in both directions between Spain and Romania. This service is widely used, being faster, safer, and cheaper than the regular post, and offering hand delivery. In fact, it can be suggested that the informal Romanian practice of sending small packages via local and regional passenger bus drivers for hand delivery has become transnational. These practices are combined with travel from Spain to Romania by air, bus, or private cars back and forth for holidays, social events such as weddings, and arranging birth and marriage certificates and other bureaucratic necessities (Fradejas-García, 2021b). Consequently, 77% of our respondents had traveled to Romania at least once in the last two years, and they spent on average more than five weeks in their home country over those two years.

Thus, to navigate the TSF, mobility and informal activities intersect as strategies to “manipulate or exploit the formal rules” (Ledeneva 2008: 119). For example, some of our respondents complained that fellow citizens received unemployment payments from Spain while they were living in Romania, it being possible to draw these benefits via the internet. A second example is that a few respondents who had acquired Spanish nationality maintained both nationalities and passports – Romanian and Spanish – even though dual citizenship is not allowed in either country. A third example is civil registration strategies in the places of both destination and origin. As a livelihood strategy, international mobility can be [49] combined with certain strategies for obtaining documents and meeting the requirements of the various administrative systems. Indeed, as one interviewee told us, “there is a lot of *trapicheo* (scheming)

because people ask for €300 or €400 to register you at their houses [in the Padrón]”.<sup>17</sup> Though they do not live there, being registered in the Padrón, a census of inhabitants conducted by local governments, is needed to start the process of obtaining a residence permit in Spain, among other local and regional social and economic benefits.

Summing up, migrants’ (im)mobilities and informal practices are intertwined as livelihood strategies for those who live or participate in the TSF. The ability to move due to the regularization of intra-EU mobility by workers, good infrastructure, cheap travel, smooth transnational connections, and social support enables various mobilities – settled, circular, temporal, open-ended, etc.<sup>18</sup> – that permit people to exploit the formal rules of various states and their institutions.

## **6. Navigating processes of formalization and informalization: regularization, immobility, and institutionalization**

The parallel processes of formalization and informalization examined here involve administrative regularization, transnational institutionalization, adaptation to formal and informal practices and economies, and moving from undeclared work to the informalization of formal labor, defined by precarity, exploitation, and flexibilization (Likic-Brboric et al., 2013). Our interviewees reported an average of 13.4 years of residence in Spain at the time of the interview, ranging from nine months to 25 years, and around 14% had lived in countries other than Romania and Spain. Their main motivations for migration were seeking better economic conditions or family reunification or both. What is striking is that only 10% had been unemployed in

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<sup>17</sup> Middle-aged female who has lived in Spain for more than twenty years and is very well-connected transnationally. Recorded interview, 03.03.2020

<sup>18</sup> Within the TSFs, we have analyzed various types of international migration mobility: permanent ( $A \rightarrow B$ ); circular ( $A \leftrightarrow B$ ); returnees ( $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$ ); re-emigration ( $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$ ); returnees to the previous enclave ( $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow B$ ); and immobile ( $A - B$ ).



Romania, where 55% were in formal –employment, 45% with a full-time fixed contract, before they migrated to Spain. Consequently, they moved from a formal context of [50] labor in Romania to a situation in Spain of higher salaries but often undeclared jobs. A survey conducted at the end of 2007, a year after the entry of Romania into the EU, estimated that 45% of Romanians of working age living in Spain were working irregularly, 15% were combining regular and irregular work, and 28% working regularly; the other 12% did not respond to the survey (Marcu 2009: 176-177). These data suggest that migration was a subsistence strategy because work formalization was not a motivation for migration.

For some respondents, their arrival was the starting point of a long parallel process of formalization, with access to formal jobs and administrative regularization, and informalization, that is, adapting to new informal practices and learning the new rules of ‘informality’. Formalization went hand in hand with the bilateral and EU policy agreements of 2002 to 2007, which smoothed the path towards residence regularization, work permits, and family reunifications, as well as in learning local informal practices and developing local informal relations.<sup>19</sup>

The steps from undeclared work to formal job contracts are paradigmatic of these two processes. These usually started with an informal agreement to do an undeclared job. It was seen as a test period and could last several years. Then the employer had the option of formalizing the contract and thus facilitating the regularization. We take an example of this process from our field notes:

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<sup>19</sup> As some research participants stressed, bars and restaurants in Spain played an important role as informal social spaces where Romanians could develop their (local) personal networks. This relational work has been instrumentalized to access jobs, accommodation, and other basic needs by word of mouth. Also, in comparison with Spaniards, Romanians tip better tips (*baksheesh* in Romanian, *propina* in Spanish), an informal practice which has been proudly maintained in Spain by Romanian migrants.

Ironim (a pseudonym) says he was very lucky when he arrived in Castelló in 2000. After six days waiting in Plaza Maria Agustina, the immigrant location for informal work-seekers, someone asked them who wanted to work in a bakery. Nobody was interested, but Ironim boldly accepted, and he is still working in this bakery. In the first two years, he worked without a contract, but the firm supported him in regularizing the situation with a temporary contract in 2002. Since 2006, he has had a full-time contract and has become a pastry chef expert in local sweets.<sup>20</sup> [51]

It is interesting to note that many Romanian employees were sponsored by their Spanish employers in obtaining documents and regularizing their employment situation, although some informal features might remain. For example, employees worked for the formal minimum wage but informally received the money in B (“in black”) to complete the salary. In some cases, the relation between employee and employer became blurred, as they became friends, mostly among those who had daily close contact, as in the case of waitresses and domestic workers, in line with Kovács’ research among informal child-care workers in Romania (2014).

Permanent contracts provide stability and encourage the formation of a long-term life project. As a result, 32% of our respondents now have a full-time permanent contract, 12% a part-time one. In Castelló de la Plana, the ceramics industry also gives formal contracts that provide an anchor for permanent settlement (Molina et al., 2018), the same role that agribusiness has played in Roquetas de Mar (Fradejas-García, Molina, & Lubbers, 2022). This process has an immobility effect because formal labor is a precious asset, and even with low salaries, hard work, and unpaid extra hours, people tend to maintain their formal jobs in Spain. Indeed, 54% of employed respondents felt

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<sup>20</sup> A male participant from Romania. Brief fieldnotes, CAS032, February 2018.

that what they earned in Spain was much better than they could in Romania, with a further 29% indicating that it was a little better.

In addition, job stability means meeting new informal contacts at the workplace who can mitigate future uncertainties over employment. One research participant told us that he was not worried about jobs in the future because he already has the contacts, both Romanians and Spaniards, to *enchufarme* in something, that is, to pull strings to find employment if needed, as explained in Section 4. In this regard, 71% of our working respondents reported that they had relied on family, friends, and acquaintances to find their current jobs. This percentage is higher than among Spain's general population (see Section 4), and it suggests that Romanian migrants in Spain are using their informal networks more than Spaniards for seeking employment. Finally, when asked whether they had to pay brokers or middlemen to find a job, some participants knew of cases in Romania as well as in Spain. Asked whether she knew anyone who had paid an intermediary to get a job, one interviewee pointed out that "Everyone who goes to a temporary employment agency has to make it [pay to get [52] a job]"<sup>21</sup>, showing how the informalization of labor works in the current formal labor market as well.

Along with the process of job regularization and stabilization described earlier, our ethnographic data reveal a parallel process in which household income and reproduction are made up with undeclared jobs and informal economic activities such as house cleaning or temporary or one-off jobs in agriculture, construction, and services, as well as child-care, baking cakes and sweets for parties, renting out rooms in their homes, working as a DJ at social events, and even collaborating in transnational enterprises that import and export cars (Fradejas-García, 2021b). The strategy of combining declared

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<sup>21</sup> A middle-age female living in Spain for more than 20 years and very connected transnationally. Recorded interview, 03.03.2020.

and undeclared jobs avoids dependence on a single source of income and can be a buffer against unemployment (Hart 1973). This finding recalls that of Pahl, that families and households with some protected wage labor are better placed to have a surplus in informal forms of work (1984).

It is also important to note that many Romanians have settled in Spain to provide their children with stability. More than 100,000 Romanians with formal residence in Spain in 2016 were under sixteen years old (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social de España, 2016), meaning that a young generation of Romanians is growing up in Spain. Indeed, some respondents lived in Romania until their parents regularized their residence in Spain and brought them to Spain after the large-scale family reunifications of 2007 (Marcu, 2015). Family reunification is part of a process of settlement that is also accompanied by the institutionalization of Romanian diasporic formations and demographic enclaves and that ends with institutional completeness (Molina et al., 2018) in the form of more favorable Romanian legislation for citizens abroad, bilateral agreements, church construction, the foundation of ethnic associations, and the opening of consulates and cultural centers, such as the Ministry of Romanian Citizens Living Abroad (*Ministerului Pentru Românii de Pretut Indeni*), set up at the end of the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Locally, institutions like the city council also played a role in supporting migrants with intercultural, social, and health services, and even subsidies to rent houses. In this [53] regard, the twinning agreement<sup>23</sup> signed between Castellón de la Plana and Târgoviște, the capital of Dâmbovița County, in 2017 facilitates the relations between local institutions that are rarely connected politically at the translocal level.

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<sup>22</sup> Strategia Națională pentru Românii de Pretut indeni pentru perioada 2017 – 2020 <http://www.mprp.gov.ro/web/strategia-privind-relatia-cu-romanii-de-pretutindeni-2/>

<sup>23</sup> In the same vein, a twinning agreement between Almería (the capital of Almeria province, in which Roquetas de Mar is located), and Bistrița (the capital of Bistrița-Năsăud) was suggested by politicians from both cities during the commemoration of the Great Union Day of Romania in Spain.

Along with these institutions, other non-governmental, charity organizations also played an important role by providing informal support, such as paying bills, providing food, clothes, books, and language courses, backing up registration processes and even helping Romanian migrants find jobs. Some respondents highlighted the support of local charitable organizations like Caritas, the Red Cross, and the Orthodox and Adventist churches, whose respective clergy were key community actors, as well as some Romanian associations. One respondent, however, believed that formal and informal Romanian institutions in Spain “have set up their *chiringuitos* in Spain to receive public funding to line their own pockets”.<sup>24</sup> In Spain, *chiringuito* means kiosk or beach bar in the street or on the beach, but colloquially it refers to a shady company organized to obtain informal economic benefits. Romanian communities abroad express their horizontal solidarity in other ways. For example, when a migrant passes away and has no repatriation insurance, nor the money to send the body back to be buried in Romania, money boxes are placed in Romanian bars, restaurants, associations, and churches to raise the money and help the family with the costs.

However, as discussed in Section 4, the discourses about corruption are somehow naturalized and accepted uncritically. We do not have evidence about informal forms of governance, but our ethnographic work does confirm that these ‘conspiracy’ theories are widespread and limit the participation of Romanians in some of their institutions, such as associations, churches, consulates, cultural centers, etc., while some practices of disruption, such as the failed organization of a referendum [54] for Romanians living out of the country in 2019,<sup>25</sup> create little trust in Romanian institutions.

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<sup>24</sup> Man of 39 years old living more than 20 years in Spain. Recorded interview, 18.01.2019

<sup>25</sup> As example, in 2019, many Romanian citizens in Spain were left without depositing their ballot in a referendum to reform the judicial system due to the lack of facilities  
<https://www.lasprovincias.es/politica/ocho-horas-votar-20190531003845-ntvo.html>

The process of regularization, adaptation, and institutionalization of migrants in TSFs analyzed in this section would be incomplete without analyzing its consequences for non-migrants and returnees. In the following section, we analyze the “stuckness” (Cresswell, 2012) or immobility effects that are associated with transnational mobilities and informality.

## **7. (Im)mobilities and informality of non-migrants and returnees**

During the hardest times of the economic crisis and its aftermath – approximately 2008 to 2016 –, some migrants have returned to Romania or have moved to other EU countries (Viruela & Marcu, 2015). Although some have returned to Spain afterward, the decline of the Romanian population in Spain continues (see Figures 1 and 2). To be attuned to various types of mobilities we asked the Romanian respondents who resided in Spain to refer us to people who had returned to Romania after living in Spain. After interviewing 19 of those returnees in Romania, we identified three types: (1) highly mobile people who had experienced circular migration or moved to third countries, (2) people who tried migration unsuccessfully and went back, (3) people who have returned for work, care for the family or retirement. Some had been living for nearly 20 years in Spain and they arrived at the age of retirement. Others had saved money and have returned as entrepreneurs, opening small businesses like bakeries, restaurants, or pensions, sometimes supported by formal programs from the EU and the Romanian government to promote the return of migrants, granting them 40.000€ to fund a start-up<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> E.g. ‘Romania din Spania’ [http://romania.startupeuropeaccelerator.eu/main\\_21/](http://romania.startupeuropeaccelerator.eu/main_21/) or ‘Acasa Entrepreneur

However, returning to Romania is not necessarily easy. Many migrants have children, mortgages,<sup>27</sup> and properties in Spain – 15% of our respondents own a house in Spain. Their networks of support in Romania are [55] generally small after they have spent years abroad, as returned migrants indicated in the interviews and as was confirmed by our survey, which revealed an average of 3.2 family members and friends in the country of origin. Some migrants were also aware that in Romania *informality* may jeopardize their entrepreneurial projects, hampering their return through bribery generally and the lack of contacts, but also blackmail. Still, 58% of our respondents in Spain declared they own a house in Romania, keeping alive the prospect of return after their retirement (Werbner, 2013), fed by constructing and maintaining houses in Romania, saving money, and working hard to get a pension from Spain in euros instead of the Romanian official currency, the leu, which is less stable. Along with those who are planning to go back when they retire, many others feel stranded in Spain, living what Sayad (2010) called a *double absence*, not being fully satisfied in either their country of destination or origin.

Returnees and non-migrants both reflected on the difficulties of living in Romania because the cost of living has risen, while salaries and wages are low. When asked about life satisfaction, one non-migrant who was a medical nurse told us that:

If you want to buy something you like, you should weigh very well the situation and hierarchize the priorities you have. Here in Romania, you can always think about tomorrow and about the fact that you have nothing to eat.<sup>28</sup>

This is consistent with statistics: in 2014, 25.9% of Romanians were living with severe material deprivation, and 25% were at risk of poverty (Eurostat, 2018a). Furthermore,

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<sup>27</sup> Spanish legislation does not facilitate returning a property to the bank as compensation for the mortgage. However, some Romanians have negotiated with the banks, giving back their properties in payment.

<sup>28</sup> A middle-aged female living in Romania. Brief fieldnote, February 2018.

the price level for consumer goods and services in Romania is 45% below the average of EU member states in 2019 – in Spain the figure is 3.4% below – (Eurostat, 2020), but that is not enough to guarantee one's daily maintenance because Romania has also the second-lowest median gross hourly earnings in the EU (€2), when in Spain the figure is €9,80, and the median gross hourly pay in the EU is €13,20 (Eurostat, 2014).

The difficulties in making ends meet is a push factor for the poorest segments of the population, who are still thinking of leaving the country. In theory, nowadays it would be easier to migrate within the EU because [56] many have family, friends, and acquaintances living abroad, and therefore transnational connections. Yet international mobility is the exception. Most people connected with TSFs who are struggling to live in Romania prefer to stay and wait for better times, managing to compensate for the low wages through the informal economy and remittances – 15% of our respondents in Spain send money regularly to Romania.<sup>29</sup> Here, age is an important factor in mobility. A new generation of young non-migrants born after socialism has other forms of cultural capital and take a different approach to migration and mobility (Marcu, 2018). Some have been living in the EU Schengen area for most of their lives, have gone on holidays to other countries, speak foreign languages, and want to move to look for a better quality of life, open values, and more high-skilled career opportunities through mobility within the EU. However, their motivations and imaginaries are focused on northern European countries instead of the informalized and precarious labor markets in Italy or Spain.

In short, most non-migrants and returnees in Romania who are connected to TSFs are experiencing economic difficulties. However, the effects can be mitigated by informal

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<sup>29</sup> Although the economic crisis had a deep negative impact, workers' remittances from Spain to Romania remain one of the major financial corridors in the EU, amounting to €430 million in 2019 according to Eurostat: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/39326.pdf>



remittances, receiving savings and pensions from their period of residence in Spain, and using their potential to be internationally mobile (e.g. seasonal work, studying abroad, etc.), thus instrumentalizing their transnational social relations abroad. How informal practices from Spain are used by return migrants in Romania or in other, third countries connected with the TSF has yet to be investigated.

## **8. Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have explored the relationship between mobility and informality by analyzing how informal practices evolve when people migrate and move within TSFs. The livelihood perspective allows us to analyze informality and (im)mobility as strategies that individuals and households perform to make a living, including the role played by institutions transnationally. The chapter shows that transnational migrants learn [57] how to navigate and exploit formal rules to get things done by adapting their informal practices to their new context of living.

In the migratory process described in this chapter, we developed two parallel processes. On the one hand, the process of adapting informality entails learning the unwritten rules and selecting, preserving, and adjusting the informal practices that exist in the (post-socialist) sending country to the new context, while other practices are abandoned, mostly illegal, illicit, and harmful ones. On the other hand, the formalization process involves learning the formal rules, the regularization of residence and working permits, and institutional completeness. Thus, transnational networks and geographical mobilities allowed migrants to exploit the grey areas of various formal systems and their institutions in making a living.

As we expected, informality was adopted to cope with formal restrictions on legal residence, employment, and housing in the first phase of migration. At the time, the

instrumental use of personal networks was very necessary, relying on those who had also come from their home cities and towns in Romania. This instrumental sociability contributed to the creation of transnational social fields in certain demographic enclaves and facilitated the diffusion of informal practices through social networks in order to obtain access to resources and get things done. The formalization process was eased by the entry of Romania into the EU, which permitted regularization (residence permits) and geographical mobility within the Schengen area, as well as the more institutional support of local and Romanian organizations. Moreover, the creation of demographic enclaves was smoothed by the formal labor markets associated with robust industrial districts, such as the ceramic industry in Castelló de la Plana and agribusiness in Roquetas de Mar, which also provided several formal and informal forms of work and employment opportunities in agriculture, construction, and services. Immobility at the destination (settlement) is thus a livelihood strategy for Romanian migrants, who thereby strengthened their informal networks and learned how to master both local and transnational informal practices. This practical knowledge of informal practices provided livelihood resources to their transnational families and friends, allowing the latter to move internationally if they wished and helping them to mitigate economic uncertainties by providing other forms of work, new jobs, and advantages in order to get things done when needed.

Finally, the existence of a TSF does not just open up new avenues for the migration and adaptation of informal practices, it might also [58] contribute to the development of new ones, especially those that take advantage of the bridges and grey areas between different formal systems, thus creating new values and allowing people to get ahead.

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