

PATTERNS OF SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION AND ITS SPATIAL EXPRESSION IN THE URBAN AREA OF RÂMNICU VÂLCEA: PREVENTING VS. CONTROLLING THE OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT – This paper aims to underline the dynamic patterns of social marginalization, which ultimately leads to social exclusion within the urban area of Râmnicu Vâlcea from the communist period to present. Conclusions were drawn from field observations, semi-structural interviews conducted with the guaranteed minimum income (GMI) beneficiaries (according to the Law no. 416/2001), the meta-analysis of the statistical data collected by the Directorate for Labour and Social Protection, content analysis of the local press and cartographic and historical materials. Data confirm the clustering of the GMI beneficiaries, mostly in the peripheral areas (*Nuci Colony, Morilor-Izvorului, Alunului-Poienari* and *Gib Mihăescu colonies*), as well as the ethnic fingerprint of the urban poverty along with the absence of the spatial concentration of the ethnic majority, only the areas with a high rate of marginalization (social as well as spatial) making an exception. In areas with concentrated social dwellings such as *Nuci Colony*, the effects of the intensive social contamination and disorganization emphasize that once installed, the social disorganization is much more difficult to eradicate or even to control the sprawl than to prevent the social disorganization, conflicts and increasing crime.

Keywords: marginalization, Râmnicu Vâlcea, transition, residential mobility, peripheralization, social exclusion

INTRODUCTION

The current paper represents a selection of several conclusions from a more ample study regarding the social marginalization and spatial peripheralization within the city of Râmnicu Vâlcea, located in the sub-Carpathian region between the Olt and the Jiu rivers, from the perspective of the Social Geography. In the case of the urban area of Râmnicu Vâlcea, field research observations, the anecdotic level and press reports (Figure 1) seem to lead to the same conclusions: signs of apparent peripheralization of individuals falling from the main course of social and economic life and entering the spiral of pauperization started to show in the second decade after the egalitarian communist period. Later on, the semi-structured interviews took with GMI beneficiaries (guaranteed minimum income according to the Law no. 416/2001) in Râmnicu Vâlcea showed that the elements from the historical life of the subjects are responsible for their laps from the main social and professional activities flux, as well as the gradual pauperization and the urban peripheralization by means of forced residential mobility (demolitions and dwelling repartitions) during the time of the urban reconstruction of the centre of the city in the communist period, the impact of the nationalized real estate retrocession to the initially dislocated families during the communist period and the crisis for spaces and social dwellings in the urban construction perimeters characteristic for the present time.

SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION, PERIPHERALIZATION AND EXCLUSION

According to the Research Institute for Quality of Life (2009), *marginalization* represents a continuum of the social isolation or a facet of it, assuming two forms and starting from the determinative of the processuality: “[...] the breakage or the narrowing in the field of the social

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relation of one individual/family/community/social group, manifested as a spatial-geographical/residential separation (partial or total), as well as «in terms of communication, cooperative interaction, mutual social involvement» (Popescu, 1993, according to Zamfir and Vlăsceanu, 1993, p. 317, defining the “social isolation” – The Dictionary of Sociology does not contain the term “marginalization” (as a process); it contains only the term “marginality”).



Figure 1. Press reports of protests against forcible vacancy and relocation or house demolitions in the case of Roma minority from Goranu neighbourhood in front of administrative institutions (October, 2005)

Source: Info Plus de Vâlcea (2005), p. 3; Viața Vâlcei (2005)

The social isolation implies an incondite functioning of the social networks. As so, we can distinguish two large social isolation/marginalization groups: (1) one determined by the social system itself by means of the malfunctioning of the social networks. Without wanting or accepting the given situation, individuals/groups are marginalized and pushed to social isolation by other groups or social forces. (...) (2) the auto-isolation of several individuals/communities/social groups (...) as a result of a well established purpose (for example the autarchy of the Romanian traditional village) or as a result of a deviant behavioural patterns (...)" (Research Institute for Quality of Life, 2009).

The operational sense of the social marginalization in its legislative form used in the prevention and control of the social marginalization in Romania is represented “[...] by the social peripheral position, by the isolation of the individuals or groups with limited access to the economic, political, educational and communicational resources of the collectivity; it is asserted in the absence of a minimum life-sustaining social conditions” (Law no. 116/2002 on preventing and combating social marginalization).

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From a geographical point of view, the extreme form of marginalization process is important (but which does not necessarily identify itself with the external causality of the isolation/marginalization even though it covers a significant part of the built-in situation): *exclusion*. From a geographical aspect, the term was defined as “[...] a situation in which certain members of society are, or become, separated from much that comprises the normal ‘round’ of living, and working within that society”, and should be thought of “[...] as *simultaneously social and spatial* (i.a.). Indeed, excluded individuals will tend to slip outside, or even become unwelcome visitors within those spaces which come to be regarded as the loci of ‘mainstream’ social life” (Philo, 2000, according to May, 2005, p. 411).

In this regard, an analysis of the spatial localization of the GMI beneficiaries in the city of Râmnicu Vâlcea was made between 2005 and 2007 (the years with the most consistent number of individuals), as well as the profound analysis by means of which we have proposed ourselves to access the aspects related to the correlation between the physical support offered by the establishment and the residential mobility throughout life, as well as the pauperization process within the analyzed city.

The theoretical framework of this study was based on the obvious empiric elements folding the idea that an *empiric turn* might represent the most adequate way towards a rigorous theoretical restructuring for the end of the century that has closed up at the encounter of the western Marxism with the modern geography (Soja, 1989) – we firmly believe that the social geography needed (and still needs) such a re-anchorage – and based as well, on the elements of pragmatism due to the necessity of reconfirmation of several approached scientific positions or conclusions as a result of the constant change in the social world and of the irreplicability of this type of research.

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MARGINALIZATION

Another interesting operational conceptualization of marginalization is represented by the definition of the marginalized person according to different Services for Preventing the Social Marginalization (SPSM) where the endowment of several aidful amounts in terms of payment of the rent for the social marginalized or at risk of being socially marginalized persons/families is made on the following operational definition: “The socially marginalized person is a person that benefits from a minimum guaranteed income or is a part of a family that benefits from a minimum guaranteed income and is found in one of the following given situations: is unemployed; does not own or use an establishment; is living in improper life-conditions (...)” (SPSM, General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection, Sector 6, București), *the risk of social marginalization* being a priori defined and distinctively operationalized.

By analyzing the summary series of data for Râmnicu Vâlcea, since the enactment of the *Law no.416/2001* to present, large fluctuations regarding the number of beneficiaries have been recorded, especially until 2007 - fluctuations reaching up to 200 persons (between 2003 and 2004 – a positive one reaching the maximum of 1137 persons, and between 2005 and 2006, and 2006-2007 – a negative one). From 2007 (Table 1), fluctuations were appreciated as circumstantial rather than explained by a causal reasoning.

Table 1. *Socially assisted individuals (relevant categories) in Râmnicu Vâlcea between 2007 and 2013*

Category	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Singles/families without income (GMI beneficiaries)	194	152	174	213	151	162	163
Roma ethnics	832	722	626	289	502	620	750

Source: data provided by Râmnicu Vâlcea Municipality

A detailed analysis based on semi-structural interviews survey with the beneficiaries of the GMI was conducted in order to access the different aspects related to the correlation between the

physical support offered by the dwelling and the residential mobility throughout life, the pauperization process, respectively, and correlate them with the field observations of the analyzed urban areas.

THE SIDESLIP FROM THE MAINSTREAM

In the subjects' personal history, regardless of the ethnic, socio-economic or professional status of the subjects, the current status as beneficiary is frequently associated with the existence of at least one uninspired real estate related decision that has subsequently determined over-congestion of the current dwelling or the loss of a dwelling and the receipt of a social one from the local authorities (Figure 2). In other cases, the continuous accumulation of utility debts or the vicious management of the financial funds because of alcoholism, misunderstandings between couples followed by the breakage of the family and the partition of belongings have inevitably led to selling the initial dwelling and the purchase of a smaller one, in most cases, with only one third- or fourth-category room, with small stoves located in the corridor of the block of flats.

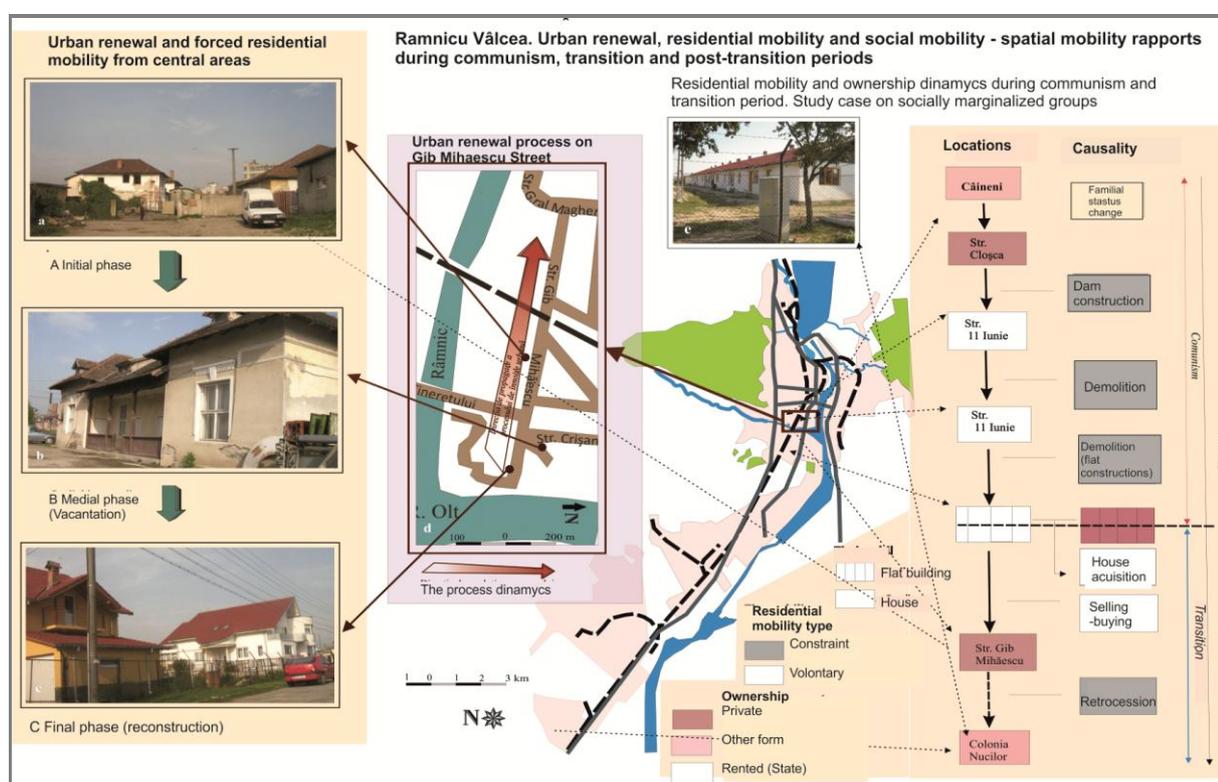


Figure 2. Râmnicu Vâlcea. Urban renewal, residential mobility and social mobility reports during Communism, transition and post-transition periods

The pauperization process was often associated with the deterioration of the physical health state of one family member, professional affections or labour accidents which subsequently required either constant care (nowadays, many of these people having a personal assistant), either were followed by the renouncement to work of another family member in order to assure constant care, either to the continuous increase of the expenses due to medical interventions that have determined the accumulation of the financial debts and the non-payment of the utility bills, etc.

Poverty and impoverishment are also associated with major life incidents such as divorce or the decease of a person, especially in circumstances in which the remaining persons have an elder person (usually parents) or a child in care, which leads to difficulties and the impossibility of finding a job. Thus, the way to a socio-economic independence and to the participation in the main life flux and social activities is closed.

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Nevertheless, poverty is associated to different states of mind (depressive, slight intellectual disabilities, memory related deficiencies – possible forms of mental disorders), even between the young, capable of working population. Even though these are slight or just subjectively emphasized – reliant to the social isolation and the non-participation to the active life, along with the continuous recession into pauperization can represent a definitive existential trap into the dependence upon social services, by means of ingravescence and leading to the loss of one's confidence, to the loss of the auto-sustaining capability and social and material independence, thus overturning the negative coil of the social marginalization, and implicitly the lack of any involvement in an active and social life.

The large fluctuations, between 25-33% of the annual number of beneficiaries, reflect the fact that, for the moment, the beneficiary status is a transitory one for an important part of beneficiaries, but the danger of a long-term “installation” of a severe poverty still exists. This negative coil, and without the involvement of any mental state (excluding the slight form of depression), is encountered in the case of persons that have lost their job a long time ago (over 5-7 years ago, but during the transition period) as a result of the economic restructuring and that, after two or three attempts of finding another job have lost confidence in themselves and live with the feeling that they are awestruck by the rapid evolution of the demand for qualification, flexibility and active involvement of the current work force.

If they have a certain age and a minimum qualification or if they are unqualified, mostly due to a low level of education, subjects consider themselves or their life partners as “*unemployable for life*”.



Figure 3. *The Ostroveni – Râmnicu Vâlcea (South) great congregate-type habitat with a population of more than 50,000 inhabitants, built during the communist period for residential purposes and placed in the proximity of the southern industrial platform. a) south-eastern view; b) view towards the western part; c) the left front of Râmnicu (Cina Area)*

Because of the perceived psychological and social background of the decline and restructuring of the economic activities from the gigantic southern industrial platform, which massively absorbed

the workforce and involved the majority of residents living in the great Ostroveni district (Figure 3), the residents' massive confrontation with the continuous problem of unemployment, along with the necessity of finding a working place within the new smaller firms – different from the industrial giants they had got used to (and adding the lack of experience in searching for a job or preparing a job interview), creates an imitative social behaviour, by means of spatial concentration in the same district of a population confronted with the same problem.

Generalizing, it is possible to assume that the other residential areas, much more reduced in size than the great working districts, most of them characterized by the presence of unfamiliar type of houses and evidently sheltering a population with a much higher socio-occupational level, might have been, at the end of the communist period, involved in different service structures or in the administrative structures of the secondary compartments and, thus, they had not been affected by the economic restructuring. As result, they do not confront with a “[...] mass psychosis of unemployment”. In the case of large working districts, the confrontation with the same problem induces an inert state of fatality and resignation conveyed to a sufficiently large scale, beyond which, with the exception of remigration to rural space or migration abroad for employment opportunities – two massively conveyed solutions by means of social contamination – the pattern of searching for a job among small scale hiring firms was not disseminated.

When examining the spatial distribution and considering the urban residential mobility as result of pauperization, it is extremely difficult to make an analysis at the level of most ethnic groups. However, it is much easier in the case of Roma communities – considered a priori throughout the time as a clear and evident form of poverty (fact reflected by the living conditions). In addition, if we consider the peculiar life forms much more obvious in the landscape (and much more easier to trace back in time) and if we do not resume the analysis to the characteristic sequence of the transition period but extend it to the communist period as well (or to a much longer period), the result is that the dynamics of the city (including the spatial one and especially that of the built-up area) makes the spatial location of the Roma communities on the centre-periphery continuum to be modified over time: *Radu de la Afumați – Daniil Ionescu street, Argintari-Izvorului street – Petrișor neighbourhood, the banks of the Olt and the Râmnic rivers* (Figures 2 and 4).

Without challenging the existence of a spatial peripheralization process (at least not a distant one and not for the transition period; in the case of this peculiar city, we do not have the necessary insight regarding the possible existence of a correlation between the urban systematization policies in the communist period and the possible hidden policies regarding the ethnic minorities) as result of the diverse and complex parameters such as the continuous pauperization of the members of given ethnic groups or the continuous demographic dislocations as result of the consecutive demolition, real estate retrocession, etc. capable of leading them into a more and more marginalized position, a fact needs to be taken into account: even the first historical references of ethnic groups mentioned that these areas were located in the peripheral part, towards the northern city border. The raising of Roma tents in the peripheral areas of the city during the modern period and the Middle Ages was more a rule than an exception (Nicolae, 2002, for the positioning against the fortress walls). Generally, the borders of Râmnicu Vâlcea city arise from a series of writings: the city was centred in the north-western part of the current built-up area located at the foot of *Capela Hill*, in the perimeter between *Cuvioasa Paraschiva Church* and the Archbishopric (Giurescu, according to Mateescu, 1999) – as a northern border: “the city on the hill was firstly extended towards the Archbishopric which, since its foundation in 1500, was located at the border of the Râmnicu city that was delimited by the access road to the Chapel. Beyond this, it could have existed (...) either a courtyard, followed by *Țigănia, Cetățuia, and Priba*” (Tamaș, 1994, p. 46). Regarding the settlement of the Roma groups in the northern part of the city, several authors take into account the hypothesis of either their presence by means of manumission (1857) (Soare, 2002), or before it (Mateescu, 1999). In 1989, *The Geographical Dictionary of Romania* (quoted in Mateescu, 1993, p. 92) recorded the following: “[...] 7317 inhabitants (including *Țigănia* and *Cetățuia* neighbourhoods)”. In many occasions, this area was designated as a “neighbourhood” leading to the idea of a larger size.

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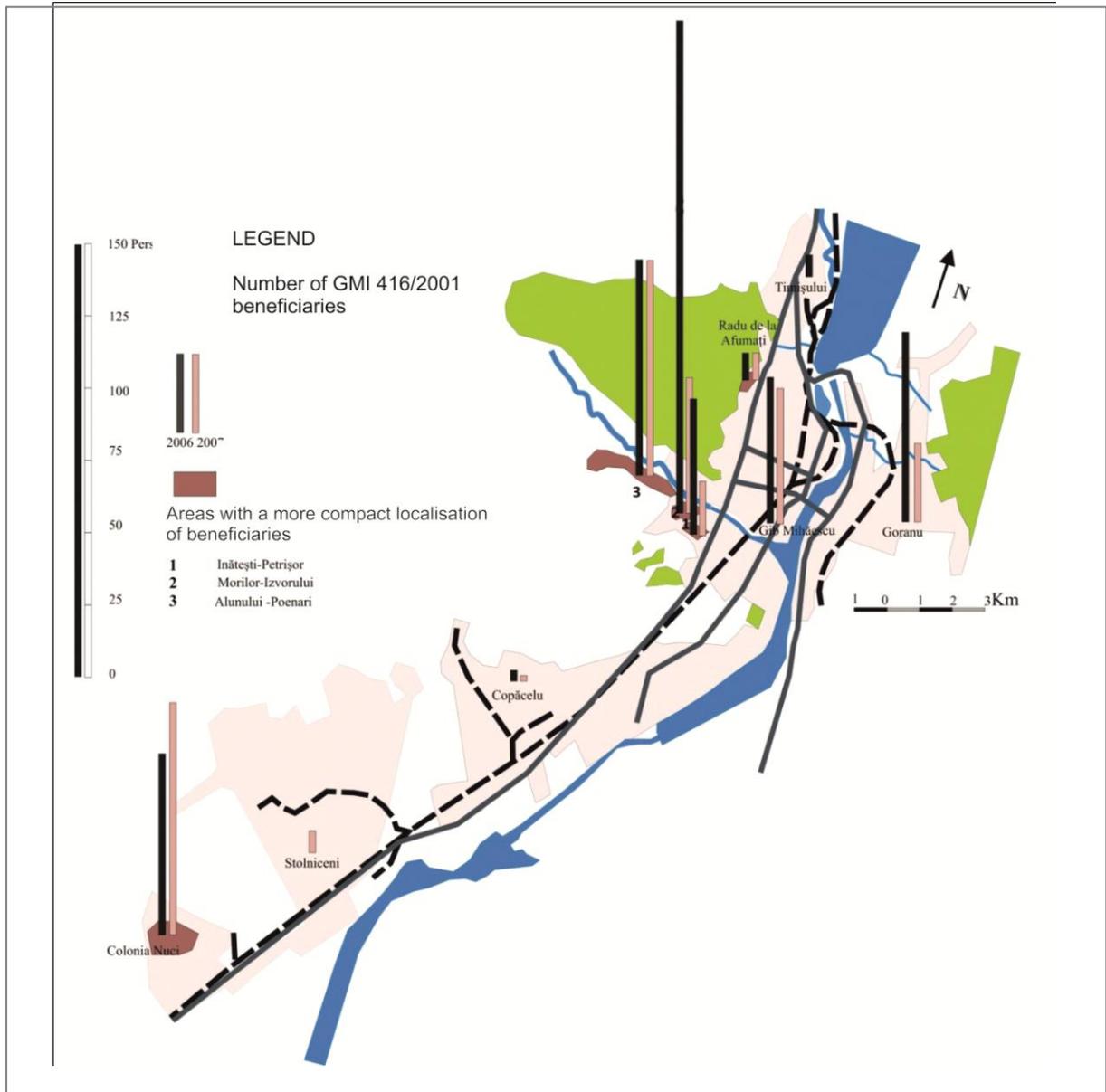


Figure 4. Râmnicu Vâlcea. Main areas with clustering of GMI beneficiaries (Law no. 416/2001)

Regarding the city taken into consideration, the residential peripheralization, especially of the ethnic Roma population, had begun prior to the transition period with its large constructions, characteristic for the communist period and continued during the transition period.

When analysing, for example, the spatial location of the dwellings of the GMI beneficiaries in Râmnicu Vâlcea between 2005 and 2007 (Figure 4), it results that the areas where most of the GMI beneficiaries are located correspond to the areas with the highest concentration of Roma population (the database of the Directorate for Labour and Social Protection contains information on this type of aids divided on ethnic groups, leading to an even more transparent spatial clustering): *Alunului* (along with Alunului, Buda, and Poenari streets), *Morilor – Izvorului* (which also comprises Bicz, Iazului, and Crângului streets), *Goranu* (along with Straubing and București streets), *Gib Mihăescu* (with Eroilor, Libertății, and Crișan streets), *Inătești* (with Petrișor street), *Nuci Colony* (comprising Căpitan Hanciu and Govorei streets), and *Nuci Street, Timișului* (with Someșului and Carpați), etc.

A particular case is represented by the *Nuci Colony* (Figure 5) and the beneficiaries located on the access street from the settlement to the plant. This complex of dwellings, isolated from the rest of



Figure 5. *The Nuci Colony (the renewed wing)*

the urban area, is located in the southern extremity of the city and the industrial platform and it was built to accommodate the workforce for the chemical plant. Although the block of flats dwellings were projected to have wide and generous spaces, the feeling of spatial isolation and social disorganization this area is confronting with is extremely noticeable even though, during the communist period, this area was extremely viable and had a small town-like appearance. Nowadays, with the exception of the current dwellings, the entire infrastructure is a ruin. The main aspect that requires attention from the local authorities is the self-reproduction and self-fuelling of poverty, social disorganization and crime enhancement by social contamination in this newly found “solution” to the “central

problems” that the social housing in Nuci Colony brings. First, it is important to understand how smaller the chances of being hired get in the case of people relocated in this “redlined” area.

Apart from the fact that people that see themselves on a continuum from “unable to keep a house for their family” to “unemployable for life” when living in central areas (Gib Mihăescu, Izvorului, Alunului, etc.), the moment they were relocated to the remote and isolated Nuci Colony (Figures 2, 4 and 5), the spatial and social isolation, the feeling that they are in the farthest periphery possible from the main social and professional flux in Râmnicu Vâlcea become even more concrete.

Moreover, the other-representation is added to self-perception. The GMI beneficiaries often report being prejudged by HR interviewers: “[...] the moment they heard that I live in Nuci Colony, the job was magically no longer available”. This in the context in which the Nuci Colony has a bad reputation for crime rate and antisocial acting which make the employers not willing to assume the risk of hiring a person for its qualification or for social labelling.

The second aspect that fuels the poverty cycle is the infrastructure and the costs of collective consumption. Not having a proper sanitation infrastructure and consuming water from a collective source leads to equally billing the costs to all inhabitants at 700-800 lei/month (approximately 160-180 EUR/month even for families that are temporarily working abroad). Such costs make the amount of GMI ridiculously insufficient. The press has investigated the solution in the long term and the companies responsible for supplying these basic facilities in the area declared that the extension of infrastructure in the Nuci Colony would never represent an investment worth making.

The third factor that does not favour the social and professional reinsertion of the individuals relocated in Nuci Colony is the social climate. In the inhabitants’ opinion, mixing by relocating in the colony all the Roma ethnics that have lost their houses, without any regard for the social groups characteristics has contributed to social tensions between the sub-ethnic Roma groups and worse, in the case of teenagers, to social contamination leading to the increase in crime rate inside and outside the colony (see Mălăescu, 2009, for a broad perspective on that matter). Moreover, considering the fact that, until 2012, even the evidence of people living here and not having an ID card was still an issue, the colony was the ideal hiding place for individuals who committed crimes in foreign countries and have been followed ever since. Although the police responsible with civil protection was closely monitoring the area, starting with 2013, the implementation of a permanent police station was in order, followed by video cameras for permanent public space surveillance in Nuci Colony. The need to strengthen the monitoring of social condition in the area (social services and law and order) led to the same symptoms in only several years: the management of the consequences arising from the first

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solution applied for a previous problem – relocating the disadvantaged individuals from central areas and clustering them in inappropriate areas requires higher costs than finding the right solution from the very beginning, even an expensive or a less convenient one, but which can save costs in the long run.

CONCLUSIONS

Social marginalization in the case of most GMI beneficiaries, and especially in the case of the Roma population, is obvious and represents the product of pauperization. The causality of these social marginalization phenomena along with or independently from the spatial residential peripheralization of all those included in the negative coiling of pauperization is represented by concrete and non-subjective reasons such as systematization and urban modernization measures, hydro-technical improvements, nationalized real estate retrocession, uninspired personal decisions or other causes usually responsible for pauperization and social marginalization.

In areas with concentrated social dwellings such Nuci Colony, the effects of the intensive social contamination and disorganization emphasize that, once installed, social disorganization, conflicts, and increasing crime are much more difficult to eradicate or even to control than to prevent.

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