

‘The Romanians are coming:’ Emerging divisions and enduring misperceptions in contemporary Europe

In 2015, I took up a position at UCL’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London. Shortly before my arrival, *The Romanians are Coming*, a three-part documentary series featuring Romanians on a quest for a better life in the United Kingdom, had just been televised and was being hotly debated in the British and Romanian press as well as on social media.

Having spent the previous decade in postgraduate degrees in the United States, where outside of Slavic and Eastern European Studies programs, few can place Romania on any physical or mental map, I experienced *The Romanians are Coming* as a rude reminder of my country’s visibility in Europe and Romanians’ unenviable status as ‘significant others’ in relation to a perceived ‘European’ core of values and economic prosperity. With visibility, however, also comes the burden of (self)-identification.

Shown in response to the United Kingdom’s lifting of work restrictions for Romanians and Bulgarians in 2014, *The Romanians are Coming* (Channel 4) was advertised as ‘seeking the truth behind the headlines about immigration.’ These headlines included Nigel Farage’s apocalyptic scenarios of a Romanian invasion likely to increase criminality, steal ‘British jobs,’ and put unbearable pressure on the UK’s welfare system.

Stoking anti-immigrant sentiments, Farage’s hard Eurosceptic and far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP) had comfortably won the EU Parliamentary elections in 2014. Immigration continued to be a top issue in the 2015 general elections in the UK as a result. Immigration and its alleged pressures on the welfare system, at a time of increased austerity measures, would eventually end up tilting the balance in favour of the Leave vote in the 2016 EU Referendum.

To get to the core of this hot topic, *The Romanians Are Coming* promised to give British viewers an inside look into this presumably still little-known, but increasingly important, breed: the Romanians. A sign of their marginality, the Romanians seem to have remained virtually unknown to the British public until then. This is despite the fact that Romania was symbolically reunited with its ‘more civilised’ western European relatives after the violent collapse of Nicolae Ceauşescu’s regime in 1989, later making the union official by joining NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007.

In a move that angered many in the Romanian community, the documentary chose to focus on the outcasts of Romanian society: the poor, the uneducated, and the sick. Some of the participants also belonged to an internal ‘Other,’ the Roma, an ethnic minority heavily discriminated across much of Eastern Europe.

The Romanians are Coming thus followed the protagonists as they made their way from Romania’s slums to central London and across the United Kingdom in the hope of saving their families from poverty. The show presented the protagonists using, or even abusing, the British National Health Service (NHS) and taxpayers’ money as they tried to access health and welfare opportunities unavailable in Romania. The second episode, however, promised to address ‘middle-class immigration.’ In doing so, it introduced viewers to a nurse from Constanta, who ended up working in a care home for the elderly in Sheffield. Despite this,

the focus throughout remains on the unskilled, often unemployable, easily exploited labour force, who sleep rough in the streets and overcrowded flats.¹

In a bid for authenticity, which convinced many British journalists that the story is told ‘completely from the point of view of the immigrants themselves,’² the documentary is narrated in broken English by Alex, one of the Roma protagonists. Alex was chosen not least because, in his voice, the narrative often seems to challenge fearmongering politicians like Farage. Alex urges viewers not to let politicians “pull the wool over your eyes so that they can get some extra votes” and provides statistics on the number of Romanians who work, pay taxes, and contribute to the British economy. The extent to which Alex ventriloquises the voices and views of the producers has, however, not been examined. The pretention of allowing Romanian immigrants, and the dilapidated slums of Romania, to ‘speak for themselves’ thus enables the producers to eschew questions of responsibility over how Romanian immigration is framed. This is an inescapable act of mediating the ‘truth behind the headlines.’

In its focus on migration, the documentary captures an emerging European division between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Europe, post-1989. This separates the rule-making countries at the core of the EU and the rule-takers in its formerly socialist, Eastern European and/or Balkan periphery. With statistics registering the rate of (mostly) young Romanians fleeing the country since it joined the EU at 3.6 million, or 17% of the total population, second only to war-torn Syria, the trend is real and worrying.³

The trend has already led to significant workforce shortages, a loss of 0.6-0.9% from annual GDP growth between 1999-2014, and growing concerns over public finances for pensions, given Romania’s increasingly aging population.⁴

While some see this East-West division as an inevitable legacy of state socialism, or as a failure of post-socialist governments to promote liberalism and free markets, other commentators point convincingly to the ways in which EU institutions and policies perpetuate inequalities between its core and its southern and eastern peripheries.⁵ High among these is the manner in which local politicians conspire with foreign investors to keep wages rock-bottom and weaken workers’ rights. This explains how Romania became ‘an economist’s dream and a worker’s nightmare,’ leading to an exodus of labourers. Thus, although the UK is not Romanians’ preferred destination in the EU, the 400,000-plus

¹ Qualifying a care home worker as ‘middle-class’ is itself problematic, especially since many aspects of the protagonist’s story indicate the precarious nature of her work in the United Kingdom, including changes to the destination town seemingly made by the hiring agency without notice.

² Ellen Jones, “The Romanians Are Coming, Channel 4 – TV review: Playing the system? English-speaking Alex is cleaning our streets while sleeping rough,” *The Independent*, February 18, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/the-romanians-are-coming-channel-4-tv-review-playing-the-system-english-speaking-alex-is-cleaning-10052280.html> Last accessed 31/05/2019. See also Sam Wallaston, “The Romanians are Coming: funny, balanced, and tinged with tragedy,” *The Guardian*, February 18, 2015.

³ See the United Nations’ 2015 International Migration Report: https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2015_Highlights.pdf.

⁴ “Eastern Europe’s workers are emigrating, but its pensioners are staying,” *The Economist*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/01/19/eastern-europes-workers-are-emigrating-but-its-pensioners-are-staying/>.

⁵ Thomas Piketty, “2018, the year of Europe,” Le Blog de Thomas Piketty, January 16, 2018, <http://piketty.blog.lemonade.fr/2018/01/16/2018-the-year-of-Europe>.

Romanians who were working and living in the UK by 2018 acquired visibility because they became the second-largest group of non-UK nationals after Poles.

The Romanians are Coming, however, never tries to seriously address the structural inequalities that fuel what appears in the media as ‘Romanian mass immigration.’ They are occasionally echoed by the protagonists, who comment on the division of labour between migrant and domestic work: “In a sense, we are taking jobs from British people, but shit jobs,” says Alex as he sweeps the Central London streets he will later sleep on. Separated from his young wife and son to pursue the dream of western abundance, the Roma narrator concludes the series by questioning the policy of free movement in the EU: “Since the start of 2014, I have been free to work anywhere in the EU. But where is freedom if I have to leave home because I am too poor?”

These poignant queries remain purely rhetorical questions, overshadowed in the documentary by the raw human emotions of immigration and poverty: alienation, indignity, exploitation, and family separation. Inviting emotions, but conveniently ignoring the larger structural forces propelling Eastern European immigrants to richer EU countries, the show naturalizes their plight, implying it is somehow *inherent* to the people it afflicts. By shocking and entertaining audiences with extremes of economic and cultural backwardness, the documentary presents Romanian immigrants and the Romania they flee as apparently lacking essential ‘European’ characteristics.

The Romanian Roma protagonists featured in the show live next to the dumping ground in the slums of Baia Mare, riding horses and surviving on scrapping metal. Their presence on the screen is meant to indicate the extent to which anti-Roma discrimination is institutionalized in Romania. This community was moved there at the behest of the town hall to make room for a theological institution. Other protagonists are ‘dirt-poor Romanians’ who cannot afford to fix their teeth or get their children much-needed surgery at home. While these people deserve our pity, they are not entirely sympathetic characters, provoking as much sympathy as they do fear and ‘disgust,’ as one British interviewee puts it. Some protagonists seem to abuse the NHS and benefits system, showing little care or even understanding of the burden this puts on the UK taxpayer.

Another factor to consider is how Romanian immigration is represented as ‘male.’ The show features only one woman and, as a result, could reinforce the element of ‘threat’ found in UKIP’s propagandistic warnings about an ‘invasion’ of Romanian criminal gangs.⁶ Finally, the show emphasizes the immigrants’ own cultural ‘backwardness,’ particularly their sexism and superstitious religiosity. When asked what they think of British women, three men, UK-bound on a crowded bus mutter “we’ll nail them” through toothless grins. The implied threat is defused only by their unconvincing performances of masculinity. The viewer will later see the same men cry and cross themselves assiduously when they fail to get jobs and have to face their families as losers rather than heroic breadwinners.

⁶ The associations between masculinity and criminality are more likely in the broader context of the recent public rhetoric around Syrian immigration, divided between anti-immigrant factions that use the imagery of seemingly single men forcing the gates and fences of Europe, while pro-immigrant groups (NGOs, journalists) resort to images of women and children or families to defuse the implications of unwanted invasion. See Elissa Helms, “Men at the borders: Gender, victimhood, and war in Europe’s refugee crisis,” *focaalblog*, December 22, 2015, <http://focaalblog.com/2015/12/22/elissa-helms-men-at-the-borders-gender-victimhood-and-war-in-europes-refugee-crisis>.

Fitting well into the pattern of ‘poverty porn’ so common on recent British television, this series came in a long line of shows that commercialise the plight of immigrants and the British poor. The show’s ambivalent messages both confirm and debunk stereotypes about Romanian immigrants. This gives it a broad appeal, offering Romanian immigrants as scapegoats for how the UK welfare system appears to have failed the struggling white British working-classes. At the same time, it presents them as objects of pity, charity, or high-minded tolerance to the British middle classes.⁷

Many British journalists, who arguably fall into this latter category, ranging from those writing for *The Guardian* to those publishing in the widely-read tabloid *The Metro*, lauded the show, encouraging viewers to watch it because “It’ll give you all the emotions” and “You’ll realise how fortunate you are.”⁸ The plight of Romanian immigrants might, indeed, have given a self-esteem boost to the many Brits suffering the effects of Tory austerity policies.

The latter were (briefly) featured in the show. When asked about Romanian immigrants, working class British interviewees characterized them as ‘thieves’ and ‘disgusting people’ diluting their towns’ good old ‘British stock.’ While the show seems to confirm their views, and thus validate them as audiences, it subverts them on another level. Poor Brits are, here, exposed for their racism and political naivety, having fallen under the spell of politicians like Farage, i.e. for matching Romanian immigrants in their economic and cultural backwardness. Defining themselves in opposition to such blunt expressions of narrow-mindedness, the more liberally inclined audiences could experience a different set of emotions, including a moral sense of righteousness at debunking racist stereotypes about immigrants.

Some commentators asked important questions, however. If, they said, poverty, lack of opportunity, and Roma discrimination are genuine Romanian realities (and they certainly are), how can we fault the show’s producers for merely putting them on screen? This suggests that it is not the revelation of significant ethnic and social problems in Romania that is the problem. At issue is, rather, the ways in which these problems are dehistoricized and essentialized as inherent ‘Eastern’ characteristics that serve to strengthen Great Britain’s sense of its own civilizational superiority.

In light of recent United Nations reports on the impact of Tory austerity policies, one could make other, more reasonable, UK-Romania comparisons. One could juxtapose destitution in, for example, towns like Oldham, once known for its cotton spinning and coal mining industries, against luxury lifestyles in downtown Bucharest. Perhaps this would lead us to arrive at comparable experiences of poverty and reactionary attitudes in contemporary England. Likened in UN reports to the creation of 19th century workhouses, austerity policies have led to the “systematic immiseration of a significant part of the British population,”⁹

⁷ To mention just a few recent shows in this genre: *On Benefits and Proud* (Channel 5), *Gypsies on Benefits and Proud* (Channel 5), *The Scheme* (BBC), *Saints and Scroungers* (BBC), *The Tricks of the Dole Cheats* (Channel 5), *Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole* (Channel 5), *Benefits Street* (Channel 4), *Immigration Street* (Channel 4), *Illegal Immigrants and Proud* (Channel 5), *Benefits: Too Fat to Work* (Channel 5), *Immigration Nation* (Channel 4), *Nick & Margaret: We Pay Your Benefits & Too Many Immigrants* (BBC1), *Skint* (Channel 4), *Benefits Brits by the Sea* (Channel 5).

⁸ Katie Baillie, “6 Reasons why The Romanians are Coming is definitely worth a watch,” *Metro*, February 17, 2015, <https://metro.co.uk/2015/02/17/6-reasons-why-the-romanians-are-coming-is-definitely-worth-a-watch-5066453>.

⁹ See <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/39/Add.1>

whose lives have been reduced to something, in Thomas Hobbes's famous formulation, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.'

Yet, while poverty and xenophobia are essentialized as matters of culture and identity in Europe's eastern peripheries, they are properly contextualized and explained in terms of specific political and economic factors in the UK.

Although they address new manifestations of the East-West divide in immigration trends, shows like *The Romanians Are Coming* represent that divide by drawing on an enduring discourse with roots in the writings of 18th-century French *philosophes* as well as the 18th-19th-century British and French travel writings, which envisioned European peripheries like Russia or the Balkans as the constitutive 'Other' of the civilized European world.¹⁰ Not unlike contemporary British journalists, who are discovering 'how fortunate they are' during their incursions into the 'new' Europe, nineteenth-century travellers, who were steeped in Enlightenment values of modernity, progress, rationality and secularity bemoaned what they perceived as the primitiveness, brutishness, poverty, superstitions, violence and unsuitability for self-rule in the Ottoman Empire's Christian lands.

Similarly, British accounts at the time represented the presumably violent and primitive nature of Balkan populations by analogy with that of the British working classes, which evoked a comparable prospect of social and political anarchy for their upper-class audiences back home.¹¹ To evoke eastern 'backwardness,' nineteenth-century travellers also represented Eastern European or Balkan populations in terms typically reserved for colonial subjects. Anticipating contemporary observers, British travellers through nineteenth-century Bulgaria, for example, compared the habits of local peasants with "the North American tribes of Flat-head Indians" or noted that "the Rayah (Christian Ottoman subjects), like the negro, diffuses around him a peculiar aromatic odour by no means Sabean."¹²

These perceptions have persisted in contemporary history: if the association of the region with chaos and violence was revived during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, the post-Cold War tendency to equate 'modernity' with triumphant liberal capitalism has also lent new credibility to the notion that Europe's eastern peripheries are economically 'backward.' This association, built on a Western Cold War logic, which characterized state socialism in terms of political 'neo-absolutism,' economic mismanagement, and privation, defining it as essentially 'unmodern.'¹³

Some scholars have gone further, arguing convincingly that the processes of NATO and EU expansion in the post-socialist period have triggered a 'downgrading' rather than an 'upgrading' of Eastern Europe in the scale of economic and cultural development. As Merje Kuus puts it, Eastern Europe is "No longer treated as a second world – antagonistic but

¹⁰ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Andrew Hammond, "The Uses of Balkanism: Representation and Power in British Travel Writing, 1850-1914," *Slavonic and Eastern European Review* 82, no. 3 (July 2004): 601–624.

¹² S.G.B. St. Clair and Charles A. Brophy, *A Resident in Bulgaria* (London: John Murray, 1869), 7 and 17.

¹³ Paul Betts and Katherine Pence (eds.), *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

capable of industrial innovation – but as a variant of Third World – and hence a space under Western tutelage.” Eastern Europe has essentially been ‘Third-Worldized.’¹⁴

The Roma narrator in *The Romanians are Coming* gestures to the Third-Worldization of Eastern Europe when discussing the British reaction to Romanian immigration: “You Brits went crazy, like we are the Taliban or something.”

Most importantly for post-1989 dynamics, the entire process of EU accession was framed in patronising terms, whereby ‘young’ and ‘inexperienced’ applicants were meant to learn how to be ‘European’ from the Union’s old and uncontested democracies. Historically envisioned as the bridge between East and West, barbarity and civilization, Eastern European candidates have been eager to overcome the legacies of socialist backwardness and prove themselves worthy of their new European family. Exploring similar dynamics of ‘Europeanization’ in 19th-century Bulgaria, Aleksander Kiossev coined the term ‘self-colonisation’ to capture the processes whereby Eastern European elites internalized, legitimized, and measured themselves against emerging European standards of national and European identity.¹⁵

The diverse Romanian responses to the Channel 4 documentary, which say as much about how Romanians perceive themselves as how others perceive them, can give us insights into the dynamics of ‘self-colonisation’ in the 21st century. This process has, it should be noted, been largely democratized so that political and intellectual elites are not the only ones measuring themselves against internalized standards of ‘Europeanness.’

Probably the most vocal and immediate Romanian response to the show was outrage at the perceived misrepresentation of their community. This reaction was, undoubtedly, heightened by the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the UK. Romanian politicians took issue with the ‘prejudiced’ portrayal and ‘humiliation’ of Romanians. Some UK Romanians, meanwhile, organized a ‘silent protest’ at the headquarters of Channel 4, asking participants to dress in business suits. Others initiated petitions demanding that the show be cancelled, or created Facebook groups to present – usually middle-class and non-Roma – ‘success stories’ of Romanian immigration.¹⁶

While these responses made legitimate criticisms of the documentary’s unrepresentative focus on benefits immigration, many commentators shared with the documentary producers an exclusionary notion of European identity. This was often expressed in now-politically-incorrect classist – and even racialized – terms. The latter is evident in responses on social media featuring photos of Indians with the caption ‘The British are coming,’ responses meant to both question the Europeanness of the British and emphasise the racial Europeanness or ‘whiteness’ of Romanians. The corollary of such claims is that, by virtue of their whiteness, Romanians are more easily culturally assimilable in the UK.

This is also why many documentary viewers felt particularly offended by the conflation of Romanians with the (Romanian) Roma. Because Romanians associate the Roma with racial

¹⁴ Merje Kuus, “Europe’s Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe,” *Progress in Human Geography* 28, no. 4 (August 2004): 472–89.

¹⁵ Alexander Kiossev, “Notes on the Self-Colonizing Cultures,” in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, eds. Bonjana Pejić and David Elliott (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999).

¹⁶ On the protest and petitions, see Anamaria Șandra, “Channel 4’s New Show Seems to Have Offended the Whole of Romania,” *Vice*, February 25, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/yvqy5j/the-romanians-are-coming-documentary-channel-4-protest-876.

inferiority and economic underdevelopment, some commentators thought the documentary was a case of the British denial of Romanians' European identity. This goes for both the show's producers and its participants. As a socially constructed category, the Roma blends class and racial elements, which explains why poor non-Roma immigrants were unquestioningly assimilated to this category by many Romanian commentators. In other words, it is precisely their embrace of an exclusionary European discourse of identity (and concurrent projection of underdevelopment on a symbolic 'inner East') that drives some Romanians to dissociate themselves from their Roma compatriots.¹⁷

Aided by the haphazard name similarity, the Roma-Romanian conflation and the angered objections it triggered were not new, having informed previous diplomatic scandals in Italy and France. By comparison, Romanian responses to the Channel 4 documentary were more nuanced, with some online commentators criticising their compatriots' 'facile outrage' at a foreign exposé, arguing instead for accepting and working towards a solution to Romania's ethnic and social problems.¹⁸ Similarly, Romanian academics have written a number of critical English-language analyses of the documentary, the reactions it triggered, and the phenomenon of immigration behind it.¹⁹

There were also more light-hearted responses that resorted to irony. If you Google the documentary title these days, you'll likely come across festivals of stand-up comedy featuring Romanian comedians in London. This evokes earlier, ingenious responses to the UK's negative ad campaign meant to dissuade would-be Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants to come to the UK. In response to self-deprecating posters created by Brits in a campaign run by the *The Guardian*, Romanians and Bulgarians initiated their counter-campaigns. Under the heading 'Why Don't You Come Over? We may not like Britain, but you will love Romania,' the Romanian campaign was run by the online newspaper, *Gândul*, and masterminded by the creative director of the Romanian advertising agency GMP.²⁰ The campaign featured posters reading 'We speak better English than anywhere you've been in France,' 'Our draft beer is less expensive than your bottled water,' 'We sell more food groups than pie, sausage, fish and chips' and 'Charles bought a house here in 2005. And Harry has never been photographed naked once.'

The diversity of Romanian responses suggests a more secure sense of European identity. This evokes the realities of freedom of movement and increased opportunity EU integration has made possible for younger, middle-class, college-educated Romanians, usually conversant in both foreign languages and dominant European values. From student exchange programmes like Erasmus to increased work mobility and the democratization of travel, Romania's EU integration has significantly contributed to the blurring of the hard borders erected during the Cold War. Citizens of everywhere, Romanians in these generational and class categories go on holiday across the continent, study alongside age peers from around the world in academic centres, belong to transnational networks of European activism, and make strategic

¹⁷ This process was described by Milica Bakić-Hayden as 'nesting orientalism' in relation to former Yugoslavia, but it is applicable throughout eastern Europe. See Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *The Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 917–31.

¹⁸ "Ne ofensăm prea ușor, ne civilizăm prea greu," *www.petreanu.ro*, February 19, 2015, <https://petreanu.ro/ne-ofensam-prea-usor-ne-civilizam-prea-greu/>.

¹⁹ See Florentina C. Andreescu, "The Romanians are Coming 2015: Immigrant bodies through the British gaze," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5-6 (2019): 885–907.

²⁰ See <http://whydontyoucomeover.gandul.info/>.

deployments of European values in struggles against political corruption and other causes, from LGBT and women's rights to the environment.

The post-socialist transformations in Eastern Europe, culminating with the region's integration in the EU, set in motion a number of socio-economic and cultural processes that have brought the 'new' and 'old' Europe closer together than ever before in contemporary history. Fuelled in part by socio-economic divisions between the European core and its peripheries, increased cross-border movements such as travel and labour migration have allowed for cultural encounters that have both enhanced and challenged the promise of an integrated and inclusive European identity. Focusing on the production and reception of TV shows like *The Romanians Are Coming*, this piece explored the representations and effects of these encounters.

In their depictions of Eastern European immigrants in the United Kingdom, British media producers not only drew on familiar TV genres like 'poverty porn,' but also revived an older discourse that has, since the eighteenth century, constructed the European continent's eastern and southern margins as the constitutive 'Other' of civilised Europe. Echoing 19th-century depictions of southeast Europeans by analogy with Europe's colonial subjects or lower classes, contemporary British representations were also enabled by the broader language of tutelage characterizing the process of EU accession.

Not least because of their growing mobility, Eastern Europeans have increasingly returned the gaze as the Romanian reactions to British shows and ad campaigns indicate. While many Eastern Europeans have spoken back in the shared civilizational discourse of an exclusionary European identity, their responses, whether angry or ironic, also indicate that the imaginary West of democratic and material plenitude conjured during the Cold War has been progressively demystified. Finally, the cultural production and consumption of a show like *The Romanians Are Coming* indicates that the historical East-West division of the continent is crisscrossed by important, if often obscured, distinctions of class, generation and education that can weigh heavier than culture or nationality in enabling border crossing.