

PERMANENT WORK, TEMPORARY STAY: MIGRANT LABOUR IN BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

RALUCA BEJAN | ALEXANDRU LIȚĂ | GEORGIANA DĂNCIULESCU



Raluca Bejan
Alexandru Liță
Georgiana Dănciulescu

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Report Authors

Raluca Bejan, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada

Alexandru Liță, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Georgiana Dănciulescu, JRS, Bucharest, Romania

Research Support

Wasfi Al Naseef, JRS, Bucharest, Romania

Copyediting

Ian Drummond, Toronto, Canada

Layout and Design

Ioan Cocan, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada

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Executive Summary

After the fall of socialism in 1989, Romania experienced a massive drain of both skilled and low-skilled workers leaving the country to work abroad. To replace these workers at home, the Romanian state created a foreign worker visa to supply a cheap labour force to domestic employers. The number of foreign working permits issued saw a steep upward trend, from 10,532 in 2018 to 135,565 in 2023. Most of these permits have been granted for the construction industry, hospitality and local delivery services, and mostly to migrants from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. The legal status of these migrants is tied to their employment contracts, meaning that their right to be in Romania is conditional on their staying with the same employer. This makes them vulnerable to being forced to accept substandard working and living conditions out of fear of losing their job and thus facing deportation.

In preparing this report we have made use of desk research, including a policy scan and the submission of two information requests to the Inspectorate General of Immigration (IGI) of Romania on the basis of *Law 544/2001* on free access to information of public interest, and 25 interviews with foreign workers conducted in 2024. The purpose of this report is to provide policy recommendations to the Romanian state for the improvement of the working and living conditions of foreign workers in Romania.

Key Findings

- **'It's a scam': Privatised and unregulated recruitment.** Migrant workers in Romania are recruited not only by Romanian placement agencies, which the recent *Ordonanța de Urgență a Guvernului* [emergency ordinance; hereafter *OUG*] 32/2026 aims to register, but also by placement firms in their countries of origin. These agencies often charge applicants exorbitant fees, in the order of thousands of euros, only to provide them with a minimum-wage contract in Romania. Migrant workers often have to put in an entire year of work simply to cover what it costs them just to secure their work contract in Romania.
- **Talking the talk without walking the walk: Mismatched employment contracts.** Three-quarters of our participants ended up working in jobs that were different from what was stipulated in their contracts, sometimes for different employers or even in different cities. Workers were unaware of the currency in which they would be paid and of the taxes to be deducted from their salaries, and they were unclear on the difference between net and gross pay.
- **'Your employer's hand is around your throat': Employer dereliction of duty toward migrant workers.** Employers frequently fail to submit the paperwork for the residency and subsequently the working permits of migrant workers within the 90-day legal window, and treat this period as probationary; they also even withhold workers' passports or IDs. These practices, combined with business insolvencies, often force workers into illegality, leading to deportation and entry bans into the country. Even in cases where workers did not end up without valid papers, they were often at the mercy of their employer: they sometimes were dismissed without pay, or were told to move out of their employer-provided housing without notice, or to sign a resignation letter as soon as they arrived in Romania, all calculated tactics to avoid payment of workers' salaries.
- **Long hours, low pay and predatory work.** In many cases migrant workers in Bucharest work longer than the eight-hour daily norm stipulated by the Romanian Labour Code, often totalling more than 50 hours per week, which exceeds the legally allowed maximum of 48 weekly hours. They often have few or no days off, work on statutory holidays, and receive low wages that are insufficient to cover their daily expenses, or even receive no wages at all during their first months in the country. Furthermore, food delivery workers often pay high fees to subcontractors to online food-delivery platforms, such as for the use of company scooters or bicycles.
- **'I will chop you up, put you in a box and send you to the Philippines': Dangerous, risky and abusive work.** Migrants described instances of verbal and emotional abuse, sexual harassment, and unsafe working conditions, particularly for food delivery drivers, including witnessing colleagues die on the job from being run over in traffic. Very few workers received health and safety training; when asked about inspections, most stated that it is merely their papers being checked and not whether their employers are respecting occupational standards.

- **Falling on deaf ears: Workers' complaints largely ignored.** Migrants did not feel comfortable reporting instances of employer abuse or substandard working conditions to their employers or to Romanian authorities. Not only were they afraid of employer retaliation but they also feared that state authorities might revoke their immigration status if they complained. Talking with NGO stakeholders proved to be the only safe way for the migrant workers interviewed in this study to voice their concerns.
- **'It's like hell': Overcrowded, inadequate and expensive accommodation.** The migrants interviewed lived in severely overcrowded conditions, with up to a dozen people sharing a studio-type room. Access to facilities was limited, sometimes with up to 300 people sharing a single bathroom or kitchen. Living conditions were inadequate in other ways as well: some people lived in hallways, others slept on the floor, and men and women were forced to share the same beds. People paid an average of 200 euros for such crowded accommodations and had to endure long commutes to work.
- **The awareness-access paradox in health care.** Migrant workers in Romania have free access to emergency medical services, just like Romanian citizens. They also have access to primary health care, including visits to family doctors, specialist consultations and routine medical examinations, through the contributions paid through their employment. However, many of the migrants in our sample did not know how to access the health care system and did not know that they were medically insured. The few workers who benefited from routine medical care cited language barriers that made accessing care difficult.
- **More than meets the eye: Discrimination, racism and xenophobia at work.** Three participants in our sample referenced experiences of racism and discrimination at work, including instances of lower pay than what Romanian citizens received.
- **A midsummer night's dream: The Romanian act.** About a third of the people interviewed mentioned that they liked Romania and felt welcomed there, and had made friends and established links in their communities. However, the high cost of living and low wages were cited as deterrents to long-term settlement, which made people dream about future opportunities elsewhere, especially in Western Europe.

Recommendations

This study argues for the implementation of the following reforms by the **Romanian state**:

1. **Sign bilateral state-to-state agreements with the primary source countries of its migrant workers, specifically Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, so that migrants will be recruited by their own states.** This would eliminate predatory recruitment agencies in migrants' countries of origin and enable source countries to provide protective services for their citizens through their embassies and consulates.
2. **Amend Article 40 of OUG 32/2026 to remove the six-month time restriction during which a foreign worker cannot change their employer.** The Romanian state has no obligation to employers or to recruitment agencies to guarantee them access to a captive workforce. Migrant workers need to be free to change their employers if unsatisfied with their working conditions.
3. **Amend Law 114/1996 regarding housing to include standard occupancy guidelines for migrant workers' accommodation,** such as stipulations about maximum occupancy per room and sanitary facility-to-person ratios.
4. **Add the Ministry of Health as a joint data controller for the [WorkinRomania.gov.ro](https://www.workinromania.gov.ro) platform** and authorise it to conduct inspections of migrant workers' accommodation through its local and regional public health directorates.
5. **Raise the minimum wage in the country to a living wage level, as determined by the minimum consumption basket measure.** A living wage would improve the lives of all workers in Romania, including migrant workers.
6. **Amend *Ordonanța Guvernului* [hereafter *OG*] 25/2014 to simplify the process by which workers obtain their residency and work permits,** by requiring employers to submit all documentation to IGI in advance and by issuing residency cards at the border.
7. **Amend OUG 32/2026 so employers are required to provide migrant workers with an information sheet** outlining their labour rights and their access to health care (including emergency services, routine health examinations and access to family medicine), as well as an explanation of salary deductions and the difference between net and gross pay.

Introduction

Take a stroll through the streets of Bucharest and you can hardly miss the sight of a Glovo biker with its yellow delivery bag on the back. More often than not, the delivery guy is a migrant worker from India, Sri Lanka or Nepal. Such a sight was rare prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but nowadays it is a regular occurrence to see foreigners working in the city's restaurants, bars and coffee shops or delivering food.

The story of migrant workers is a universal one, be they Mexican workers in Canada, Bangladeshis in Japan, Indians in Dubai, or Romanians in Germany. It is the classic story of labour extraction, where economically developed nations, or those on the path to development, rely on cross-border transactions (Wallerstein, 2020), and migrant flows are one type of such transactions, to create a cheap labour market at home. For products to sell and services to be provided, domestic businesses must keep competitive prices, but low prices can only be maintained either by relocating production to somewhere where labour is cheap or by importing cheap labour from abroad.

The availability of cheap labour functions as a subsidy to national employers, as it allows domestic businesses to operate much more profitably than if they had to pay wages at the normal local rate (Castell Roldán & Alvarez Anaya, 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2022). Employers can increase their profits not only because they extract value from workers' labour, but also because this value is maximised by the absence of any obligation to pay the wages that would be demanded by domestic national workers, to offer the social protections that are afforded to domestic workers, and by the fact that they can rely on a captive labour force of workers who cannot simply leave if unhappy, since most migrants enter the country on closed permits that make their immigration status dependent on their employment contracts. While citizen workers can theoretically switch jobs if dissatisfied, most migrant workers are hostage to their contracts: leaving their employer means they must leave the country.

What makes the situation unique in Romania is the fact that the country does not fully fit the developed typology of other, usually Western states that rely on migrant labour. Romania was under state socialism until 1989 and transitioned to a market economy only in the 1990s. Its economic underdevelopment has also prompted Romania's own workers to migrate to the West: there are one million Romanians living in Italy (OECD, 2019), 900,000 in Spain (Vladr, 2014), and just under half a million in the UK (Office of National Statistics, 2019), and it is estimated that 20% of the Romanian workforce is living abroad (Eurotopics, 2018). Some have said that Romania is experiencing a 'demographic catastrophe', having the second highest proportion in the world (after Syria) of citizens living abroad (Turp-Balazs, 2018). This East-West labour trend among Romanian workers triggered a rapid import of foreign labour to replace those working abroad. In 2016, 2,899 foreign work visas were issued by Romania, and 10,532 in 2018; but starting in 2019 this number grew exponentially, and by 2022 had increased tenfold to 108,858 visas granted. By comparison, Canada brought in a similar number of temporary foreign workers in 2022, 135,565 (IRCC, 2023), but Canada has been using this kind of labour mobility arrangement since the 1970s. It is unprecedented for a country to experience such an exponential increase in foreign labour within such a short period of time.

Set against this background, *Permanent Work, Temporary Stay* examines the occupational and living conditions of migrant workers in Bucharest, Romania, to create an empirical baseline regarding some of the issues confronting this population, with the aim of proposing policy recommendations to the Romanian state for the improvement of migrants' working and living conditions.

Context: The Vulnerability of Migrant Workers on Employer-Specific Permits

Migrant workers from the Global South or from the periphery of the developed world, such as those from the former Socialist Bloc, tend to be employed in similar industries in their hosting nations. These typically include agriculture, food and beverage processing, and the hospitality industry, along with cleaning, construction and food retail. To mention a few cases, there are Mexican and Guatemalan workers on Canadian farms (Bejan et al., 2025), Mexican and Filipino workers in seafood processing in the Canadian Maritimes (Bejan et al., 2023), Romanian construction workers in the UK (Urdea, 2020), Romanians on Germany's asparagus farms (Bejan & Boatcă, 2021), and Bangladeshis in construction and the service sector in Japan (Embassy of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2026).

The industries they work in are not the only features shared in common among the migrant workers. Another is that they typically have *closed* rather than open work permits. This means that their immigration status in the host country is dependent on the employer that provided them their contract; thus, losing their job means losing their immigration status, and therefore also the right to stay in their host country. This precarious immigration status translates into a lack of the right to ask for further rights, since access to social rights in any society is generally conditional on having citizenship or permanent residency (Goldring et al., 2010).

The temporary status of migrant workers in their host countries is also used to “justify limitations on a wide range of human rights, even when migrant workers may engage in repeated migrations for decades, or effectively for their entire working lives” (Coşciug et al., 2024, p. 7). Migrant workers are therefore susceptible to unfair occupational conditions. These include low pay, verbal abuse at work, racial and xenophobic discrimination, long working hours without overtime pay; holding of passports by employers, and sometimes even dismissal and repatriation; substandard living accommodations; lack of access to labour protection, such as enforcement of health and safety standards on the job; and lack of access to healthcare and other government benefits, such as social assistance, unemployment insurance and pension schemes, to which they often contribute without the right to withdraw anything from them (Bejan et al., 2021; Bragg & Hyndman, 2024; Goldring et al., 2010; Marsden, 2014; Preibisch, 2007; Preibisch & Binford, 2008; Mohamed, 2025). The vulnerability of migrant workers is exacerbated by their fear of contacting local authorities for help. They are afraid of losing their jobs, they are unfamiliar with their legal rights and domestic labour standards, and, in the case of those employed in seasonal jobs such as agriculture, they are afraid to complain for fear of not being called back to work the following year (Bejan, 2020; Bejan et al., 2023; Bejan & Allain, 2021; Bejan et al., 2021; Bejan & Boatcă, 2021; Nakache & Kinoshita, 2010; Sorio, 2020).

The experiences of most migrant workers also contravene the Decent Work guidelines adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO). These guidelines include recommendations for the following (ILO, 2023):

- workers' right to collective bargaining;
- elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- elimination of discrimination in employment;
- guarantees of safe and healthy working environments;
- access to universal, comprehensive and sustainable social insurance, childcare services, maternity leave and workers' compensation in the event of workplace injury or illness;
- guarantee of permanent employment with standard working hours, break periods, overtime and holiday pay, and at least one day off per week;
- provision of decent wages and improvement of their living conditions, such as the establishment of national occupancy standards or the provision of quality housing for workers.

In fact, migrant workers have been classified by the ILO, along with older persons, persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and people living with HIV, as a labour segment in need of attention with regard to

social protection (ILO, 2023), specifically because their employment is temporary, with contracts tied to their employers and characterised by a lack of social rights (Bejan et al., 2025). Such contracts have even been described by the UN as a breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery (Canadian Press, 2024).

The Romanian General Inspectorate of Immigration (IGI) lists the top industries hiring foreign workers in Romania as construction (i.e., unskilled workers), textiles, hospitality (including cleaning staff), and local delivery services (IGI, 2023, 2026). The IGI also lists the top source countries for migrant workers as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India (see Table 1). Moreover, 90 per cent of the offers for migrant workers coming to Romania are to males (see Table 2). It should be noted that official statistics count the number of offers (i.e., Employment Notices) issued to foreign workers, rather than the actual working permits which are granted after the workers have already entered the country.

Table 1. Number of Employment Notices by source countries from 2016 to 2025 inclusive

Nationality	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Nepal		184	831	3,977	3,665	8,931	18,646	23,477	33,079	45,396
Sri Lanka	232	306	762	3,015	3,522	5,854	12,092	22,265	22,474	13,693
Bangladesh			118	957	1,630	6,189	29,509	18,155	6,376	8,319
Pakistan				730	730	4,361	13,270	8,252	8,043	6,590
India	74	86	566	3,664	3,433	4,805	8,531	6,646	6,847	8,082
Turkey	481	665	1,438	3,197	3,980	6,621	7,846	5,216	4,281	3,875
Vietnam	220	1,413	3,541	6,175	2,709	2,572	2,487	1,669	1,659	
Egypt					637	948	2,430	2,543	4,140	7,631
China	498	561	677	1,367	807			1,437		
Moldova	85	137	342	3,004	2,171	1,294				
others	1,309	1,569	2,257	5,043	4,166	8,387	14,047	11,580	13,681	14,226
Total	2,899	4,921	10,532	31,129	27,450	49,962	108,858	101,240	105,977	118,071

*Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs, IGI (2023; 2026)

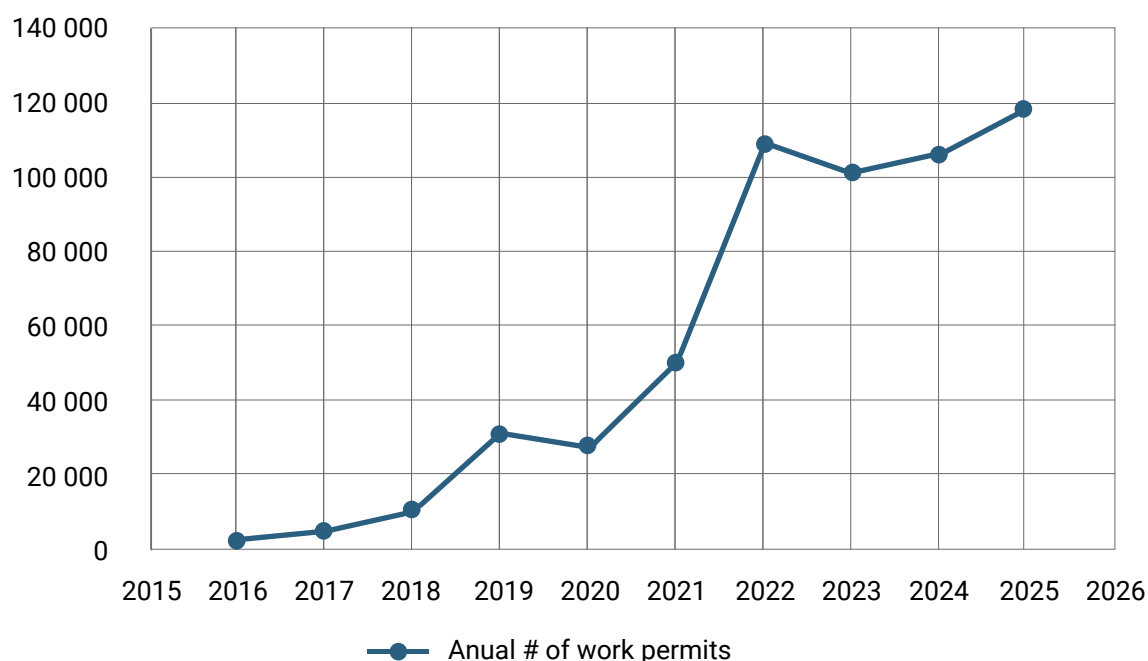
Table 2. Numbers of Employment Notices issued by gender, 2016–2025 inclusive

Gender	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Female	776	941	1,391	3,376	2,759	4,602	8,282	10,166	12,877	13,926
Male	2,123	3,980	9,141	27,753	24,691	45,360	100,576	91,074	93,100	104,145
Total	2,899	4,921	10,532	31,129	27,450	49,962	108,858	101,240	105,977	118,071

*Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs, IGI (2023; 2026)

Anecdotal accounts in the media have reported issues experienced by foreign workers in Romania similar to those experienced by foreign workers elsewhere, including: high recruitment fees, as much as 7,000 euros to secure a working contract in Romania (Kanunjna, 2022; Meseşan, 2022; Florea, 2022); workloads and working conditions different from what was initially agreed on in their employment contracts (Kanunjna, 2022; Florea & Tollea, 2021; Horeboiu, 2022); wage deductions to cover migrants' travel costs (Arad Online, 2019; Chicovschi, 2019); overtime work without overtime pay (Ştiri de Cluj, 2022; Brandabura, 2022); abuse and mistreatment at work (Kanunjna, 2022; Florea & Tollea, 2021; Horeboiu, 2022); and verbal and physical aggression from the community (Costiţă, 2025). All these factors highlight the vulnerability of migrant workers in the country and warrant attention, considering the current upward trend in the number of foreign worker visas issued by the Romanian government (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Employment Notices issued by IGI from 2015 to 2025 inclusive



*Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs, IGI (2023; 2026)

Community research undertaken in Romania has corroborated these accounts of exploitation, including: overtime work without additional pay; documents withheld by employers; high deductions that sometimes eat up workers' entire salaries; unregulated work schedules, especially for care workers who are living with their employers; high recruitment fees which lead workers to incur high levels of debts; and lengthy and bureaucratic recruitment, which often result in workers arriving to work for a non-existent employer or one that no longer needs them (Coşciug et al., 2024; Porumbescu et al., 2025). Moreover, workers experience a lack of social rights; they fear retaliation; they live in overcrowded accommodations and low-quality housing stock; they frequently report issues of hunger and malnutrition; they encounter multiple barriers to adequate health care such as hostile attitudes on the part of medical staff, being unaware of their own medical insurance, and registration delays in the medicare system; and they experience racial, ethnic and class-based discrimination at work and in the community (Coşciug et al., 2024; Porumbescu et al., 2025). These issues are further exacerbated by a legal framework that lacks a coordinated implementation by the Romanian government ministries and labour agencies (Coşciug et al., 2024) in relation to the protection of workers' rights.

In the eyes of the law: Policies affecting migrant workers' entry and stay in Romania

The procedures for hiring foreigners in Romania may be initiated only if the occupation for which employment is requested is included in the 'List of Shortage Occupations' (*Lista Ocupațiilor Deficitare*). This list is drafted and updated semi-annually or whenever necessary, by the Minister of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, and published in the Official Gazette of Romania. It is based on information provided by the National Agency for Employment, the Labour Inspectorate and IGI, following consultations with social partners such as labour unions and employer associations. On the advice of the Ministry of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, the number of working permits to be issued each year is decided on a quota system.

The maximum number of employment permits approved through the quota system has been reached every year since its inception, and was even surpassed in 2021, when numbers were supplemented by an additional 25,000 permits, doubling the quota initially agreed upon at the end of 2020 (Pirv, 2021).

The living and working conditions of migrant workers in Romania are regulated by a wide set of legal instruments spanning the fields of migration, labour and housing.

Migration

Migration of workers into Romania involves a series of bureaucratic steps that are governed by *OUG 194/2002*, *OG 25/2014*, *Law 247/2018*, *OUG 143/2022*, *Law 28/2024* and *OUG 32/2026*.

OUG 194/2002 establishes the visa regime that regulates entry into Romania. Entry is granted on the basis of a long-term visa D (*permis de lungă ședere*), issued initially for 90 days by the Romanian consulate or embassy in the worker's country of origin.

OG 25/2014 outlines the procedures for hiring a foreign worker in Romania, as follows:

- (a) The employer must first register the vacancy in the County Agency for Employment (AJOFM) and advertise it in local newspapers to Romanian and EU citizens.
- (b) If the position remains unfilled, the employer can apply for an Employment Notice for a non-EU national. The Employment Notice is issued for a specific worker.
- (c) With reference to this Employment Notice, the prospective migrant applies at the nearest Romanian consulate in their home country for a visa, which is generally issued after an interview.
- d) Once the migrant worker arrives in Romania, their employer needs to submit the worker's contract to the IGI, along with their proof of address, in order to have a Temporary Residency Card (TRC) issued; the TRC is valid for a maximum of two years. The employer has 90 days to finalise all the formalities required by the IGI, and to secure the worker's temporary right of residency. Failure to complete these procedures within the prescribed 90-day window results in the worker failing to acquire right of residency in Romania, thus falling into illegal status.
- f) Migrant workers receive their working permit based on their TRC. This permit is generally issued for an indefinite term. Migrant workers in Romania are thus put in a contradictory position: they are called 'permanent' workers in the law, but have an immigration status that is temporary, since their TRC is valid for only two years.

In 2018, as Romania was grappling with acute labour shortages, the government adopted *Law 247/2018* in order to expedite the employment of migrant workers for low-skill positions. The law's key change was that it **lowered the wage threshold** applicable to migrant workers. Prior to 2018, employers were required to pay migrant workers the national average gross wage (4,357 RON/935 EUR), but the new law required them only to pay minimum wage (1,900 RON/407 EUR).

Romania's inclusion in the European Union's Schengen Area elicited fears on the part of employers that their foreign employees would leave for Western Europe. In anticipation of this, Romanian employers lobbied the government for legislative changes that would restrict the mobility of foreign workers and ensure their retention. *OUG 143/2022* introduced the requirement of an employer-signed **release letter**, a written consent to 'release' the worker to another employer or to the labour market at large. This stipulation applies only to the first employment contract, and at the time of our study it applied only to the worker's first year in the country. Thus, a foreign worker cannot leave their place of employment unless the employer agrees in writing to 'release' them from their contract. In effect, *OUG 143/2022* introduced a kind of restricted labour contract, with the state guaranteeing to the employer that they can control the worker and extract value from their labour for a predefined period. This measure had the effect of reinforcing the structural dependency of foreign workers on their employer, and created an environment in which abusive practices could easily emerge.

When Romania joined the Schengen Area, policymakers aligned Romanian legislation with EU regulations through *Law 28/2024*, regarding the registration of migrant workers and their legal residency in Romania. Employers were now required to register the employment contract of a migrant worker with IGI within 15 working days of the worker's arrival, an obligation that did not previously exist. This measure restricts migrant workers' mobility, since it places the onus of responsibility on the employers to register their working contracts, leading to cases where migrants end up working illegally due to employers' administrative ineptitude or their unwillingness to finalise this registration process in time.

Law 28/2024 extended the validity of the TRC to two years, from the previous period of one year.

OUG 32/2026 was adopted by the Romanian government on 23 April 2026, and is Romania's most comprehensive piece of legislation regarding foreign labour. It aims to strengthen the protection of migration workers in the country and to introduce a computerised system for their recruitment and employment. This law requires the Ministry of Internal Affairs to develop an electronic platform, called [WorkinRomania.Gov.ro](https://www.workinromania.gov.ro); all employers and recruiters of migrant workers will be required to **register** on the platform. Employers will be required to have their names entered into the Employers of Foreigners Register (*Registrul Angajatorilor Străinilor*, or RAS) and recruitment agencies into the Placement Agencies Register (*Registrul Agențiilor de Plasare a Străinilor*, or RAPS). Employers who do not use a recruitment agency can obtain authorisation from the government to recruit migrant workers. Agencies who abuse migrants or are non-compliant with state regulations are subject to having their registration removed.

This law also aims to coordinate the management of the [WorkinRomania.Gov.ro](https://www.workinromania.gov.ro) platform, since several state authorities are identified as joint data controllers of the platform, including the National Employment Agency, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Justice.

OUG 32/2026 also mandates that certain provisions be included in Employment Notices for migrant workers, such as their living arrangements if the employer provides housing, and details regarding transportation for workers from their country of residence to Romania, between their accommodations and place of work, and transportation details for repatriation in instances of occupational injury or death. If the employer provides accommodation, the amount deducted for rent cannot exceed more than 25% of the worker's net salary.

OUG 32/2026 also requires that migrant workers' employment contracts be translated into the worker's language or an international language that the worker understands. Contracts are also required to contain stipulations in relation to migrant labour rights, such as maximum working time, rest periods, compensation for overtime and paid annual leave.

Recruitment agencies based in Romania are prohibited from charging commissions and fees to migrant workers. Employers and recruitment agencies must provide a financial guarantee either in cash deposited with the State Treasury or in the form of a bank guarantee in the amount of 1,000 euros per worker for individual employers and up to 75,000 euros for those placing up to 250 workers. These funds are intended to cover the costs related to workers' repatriation in unforeseen circumstances, to support workers in vulnerable situations, and to cover their accommodation and food costs in cases where these must be covered by the Romanian state.

This law also replaces the previous one-year release letter with a shorter **six-month restriction** during which a foreign worker cannot change their employer. While this period of restricted employment is shortened, it is not eliminated; thus, workers continue to be placed in situations open to occupational abuse.

Lastly, OUG 32/2026 grants migrant workers the right to strike and to take collective action, and the right to freedom of association and affiliation, and membership in a trade union or professional organisation.

Labour

All workers in Romania, regardless of their immigration status, fall under the provisions of the Labour Code (*Law 53/2003*). The Labour Code is already perceived as unfair to workers, as it enables employers to request long overtime hours for extended periods, to use limited-term contracts for positions that are in practice permanent jobs, and to restrict pay based on productivity benchmarks; it also makes it easy for them to lay off workers (ILO, n.d.; Liță, 2018).

The Labour Code defines full-time work as eight hours per day, five days per week, amounting to 40 hours per week. The employer may request employees to work an additional eight hours of paid overtime per week, resulting in a maximum of 48 hours in each week. Overtime is limited to four consecutive calendar months. Nevertheless, weekly working hours may exceed 48 hours provided that the average working time per week over a six-month reference period does not exceed 48 hours.

The Labour Code imposes weekly time off of two consecutive days and stipulates that rest between working days may not be shorter than 12 consecutive hours. For shift work, rest is defined as a minimum of eight hours between shifts. When the daily working schedule exceeds six hours, employees are entitled to a meal break and additional breaks of unspecified duration. Paid annual leave of up to 21 days is guaranteed to all employees, every year, and cannot be transferred, waived or limited.

The Romanian Labour Inspectorate (ITM) is the state authority that protects employees' rights. The Labour Code stipulates that the employer is obliged to keep a record of the working hours performed by each employee and to make this record available for inspection by the labour authorities when requested.

In summary, despite migrant workers' temporary status in the country, their working conditions are governed – on paper at least – by the Labour Code, which guarantees them social rights and protections on par with those of all other workers in Romania.

Housing

Employers are not legally obliged to provide accommodation to their migrant workers, but many do. However, these accommodations often do not meet the guidelines set out in the Housing Law (*Law 114/1996*), which include provisions of one room (living area) per person with access to a kitchen and bathroom and to electricity, and guaranteed individual access to their living space without interference from other residents.

It is only for seasonal workers in rural areas that employers are legally obliged to provide housing. This is stipulated under *OG 25/2014*, according to which the accommodation must provide an 'adequate' standard of living, and the monthly rent 'should not be excessive in relation to the net salary specified in the binding job offer.' These stipulations, however, provide no clear definitions of what an adequate standard consists of or what would constitute an excessive amount of rent.

Methodology

This study used desk research and interview data collection.

As part of the desk research, we thematically coded the main laws and emergency ordinances that make up the legal framework governing low-skill worker migration into Romania (outlined above). We also submitted two information requests to IGI on the basis of *Law 544/2001* on free access to information of public interest, on 25 October 2023 and on 24 March 2026. In these requests we asked for the numbers of Employment Notices issued by IGI from 2016 to 2023, and for 2024 and 2025, and to have this data broken down by gender and country of origin. We also asked for the total number of foreigners who requested a form of international protection (i.e., asylum) in Romania between 2016 and 2023 in whose names one or more work permits were issued during the reference period. These data will not be reported here, as it will be published elsewhere. It should be noted that it is difficult to know whether all Employment Notices issued led to actual working permits, since, as noted above, this depends on the employer submitting all documentation to the Romanian authorities in time. However, we assume that for the most part, the number of actual working permits issued corresponds to the number of Employment Notices, as many workers who arrive in the country eventually find employment elsewhere even if their first employers fail to submit the paperwork.

As part of our data collection, we conducted 25 interviews with migrant workers in the Bucharest-Ilfov region between July and October of 2024. Workers were recruited through the service delivery networks of Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) Romania and through snowball sampling. Out of the interviewed workers, 23 had come to Romania on employer-tied working permits. One participant had entered Romania on a student visa and found employment in parallel with their studies; this person was planning to quit their work and studies and migrate to a Western European country. Another participant had entered Romania on a c/ZA visa, which allows engagement in cultural, scientific or humanitarian activities for a limited time (up to 90 days), but they had transitioned to another type of visa (long-term visa D). While these two participants could not be classified as typical migrant workers, they were included in the sample because they were employed on a short-term contract and because their status in the country was temporary.

We conducted the interviews in person in either English or Arabic. Out of the 25 interviews, 20 were conducted in English and five in Arabic. Interview data were collected anonymously, by intentionally not recording the names of the workers. Moreover, no identifying information was solicited, and workers were instructed to omit identifiable information when telling their stories, such as the names of their employers, managers, supervisors, colleagues or specific work locations.

We asked participants about their recruitment and the process by which they had come to work in Romania, their occupational status in their home country, and we inquired about their migration trajectory before they entered Romania. We also asked them to comment on their daily work, housing conditions, and experiences accessing health care.

Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and 15 minutes. We transcribed the interviews verbatim and then translated the Arabic interviews into English. Transcripts were coded using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 14. Preliminary codes were used to construct the larger themes addressed in the report.

Demographic Profile

For this study, 18 men and seven women were interviewed. Participants were between 21 and 64 years old, with most between the ages of 30 and 40.

The countries of origin of our participants included Bangladesh (1), Egypt (1), India (1), Jordan (1), Nepal (1), Pakistan (1), Sri Lanka (6), Syria (5) and the Philippines (8). Their family backgrounds were diverse: some were single parents, others had typical nuclear families, some were grandparents, and some were unmarried. Twelve participants mentioned that they had close family members in their country of origin, often children who were left in the care of relatives.

Twenty participants in our sample commented on the language they used at work. Out of these, 18 mentioned that they rely on English. Two workers, however, who were employed in hospitality mentioned that they use some Romanian words, for specific ingredients in the kitchen. Participants stated that their proficiency in Romanian was also improving slowly, 'bit by bit' although 'it's very hard to adjust, to learn Romanian.'

Nine participants had had professional occupations in their country of origin. Occupations included assistant manager for security, teacher, driver, caregiver, chef, carpenter, marketing manager, wedding photographer and IT developer. Only two participants had secured a working contract in Romania for the same type of job in which they had experience at home (carpentry and culinary arts respectively). All others were working below their skill level.

Migration Trajectory

Eleven migrants in our sample had worked elsewhere on similar employment schemes prior to arriving in Romania, in countries such as Cyprus, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Taiwan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Four participants commented on their reasons for leaving these countries, mentioning a lack of labour rights, lack of pathways to permanent residency or citizenship, and economic factors such as low wages. One migrant worker who had formerly been employed in the UAE stated that their employers there had withheld their personal documents, including their passport. One Syrian participant described leaving Lebanon following changes in the legal protection regime for Syrian refugees, which introduced a sponsorship requirement for each applicant, requiring Syrians to secure a Lebanese sponsor, to commit themselves to not taking paid employment, and to pay an annual fee of USD 200 to regularise their residency status (Tabar, 2016). Similarly, another participant reported leaving Kuwait due to the lack of labour protections and discrimination. As stated by them:

Because in Kuwait it's very difficult. I don't have a day off. And my employer is not good. They are always saying bad words to you. They said that the Filipinas are stupid. That's why when I talked to my sister [name redacted], and I said that I need to transfer, because my employer wants to sell me to another agency at that time. They want to sell me to another agency to go to another employer.

Many of those who had arrived in Romania from other countries had already spent a lot of time working away from their homes and families. One participant described her anguish at being away from her children for many years, and attributed her recent diagnosis of cancer to this suffering:

I have two children, 22 and 12. The youngest one, he didn't grow up with me because when he was two and a half, I went to Kuwait. Then when he was six... seven/eight, I came here. And then when he was eight and a half, my husband died and they suffered a lot. And my youngest son keeps telling me, 'Mommy, you need to come home. I miss Daddy. I wish that I can dream about him and hug him in my dreams.' That is why I have cancer because I have had depression for almost two years. I keep crying because of my children. Also, my small one, he doesn't want to accept money from me because he wants me to... he said, 'Why do you need to give money? Just buy your medicine.' ... He said, 'I don't want you to think about us because we are okay.'

Most workers who left their children at home shared the same pain of being separated from them. As stated by someone else interviewed who was in Romania with his wife:

Yeah, we also have a son [becoming sad and speaking with regret]. We're just only talking with him on the phone, and we're not parenting. Only my mother is parenting my son. And for me, it's not good because, you know, as a father, as a parent, you're supposed to parent your child.... But for me, it's hard [almost crying, pausing to breathe]. It's hard for us, you know, overseas. But we need to sacrifice. We need to secure the future of my son because, you know, it's hard to live in our country. And, you know, I didn't see my future in our country. And I need to go somewhere, you know, to find... to make a better future for my son. That's why we decided to come to Romania. When we left the Philippines, he's already three years old. And now he is eight years old. And we're just only talking on the phone every time when I'm off. That's right. This is the hard part of being, you know, being a foreign worker. Because you need to sacrifice everything.

Most participants arrived in Romania within the last few years, in 2018 (2), 2019 (4), 2021 (2), 2022 (3), 2023 (4) or 2024 (7), with only one participant arriving earlier, in 2013. Two participants did not share their year of arrival.

Migrant workers cited economic reasons for their migration to Romania. Their salaries at home were insufficient to cover necessary daily expenses (food etc.). Their higher wages in Romania could guarantee that their family at home can have a decent standard of living and that their children or grandchildren can continue their studies. As stated by some of the participants:

I keep crying because of my children. I said, 'Look, if I am going back home, how can I feed you? How can I put your other brother into college?'

My problem is financial. Because I need to help my family. I need to help my sister. Because my sister is from a broken family and she has a son, a special child. A special-needs child. And she can't work because she needs to take care of her babies. Even at three years old she cannot walk. Because it's a special-needs child.

In many cases, people left their homes not only to provide the basic needs for their families but also to ensure their children's access to top educational opportunities, such as private schooling. Three participants mentioned having their children enrolled in private schools at home and explained their stay in Romania by the need to send money for school expenses. As shared by some of them:

In Sri Lanka the salary is small. My son is studying at a high college... My son, daughter are very expensive. Private... My son studied at a private university. My daughter also studied outside [the public school system], at a private school. To pay the money, I came back here.

I came here. I have some loans from the... Because my child, I must [send him to a] good school and I get a loan from the, I keep my gold in a bank and take some money to put my son to the school. Yeah. Private schools, at the British Council. At first, I paid 1,500 euro, when they started. Like a down payment. After that, for each month, it's not that much, it's only little. I think... It's in euro, 64. Then, I must pay more, for the exam fees, and some activities like that. It depends on the time, and what they do.

Someone else described leaving their country for religious reasons:

As you know, being a Pakistani Christian is difficult... to live in Pakistan. So, it was always a dream for being Christian to get to Europe, to have a safe and good future. So, we are always looking forward to a good future, because we are a very peaceful community there, minority, like 2%. But when I moved to Dubai, the same situation I had to face. So, I started looking for lots of jobs in Europe, but I didn't get any answers. So one of my friends, who I've been working with for a long time, for the visas, because I'm helping and assisting the Christians in Pakistan to get visas for the Gulf Peninsula, suddenly he told me that I have visas for Romania. Would you like to... because you are already applying for a lot of jobs and you get rejected. So, I said, 'Okay, apply for me.'

Typical Employment

Employment for migrant workers in Romania is either indirect, through licensed manpower agencies, or direct, through contractual arrangements with local companies. These local enterprises are predominantly small or medium-sized, typically employing no more than 45 workers. At these workplaces migrants interact with colleagues of diverse national and ethnic backgrounds: co-workers include both Romanian nationals and foreign workers, and in many cases migrants work alongside co-nationals. Although most migrants relied on recruiting companies to secure their first contract in Romania, their second or third contract was often secured directly with their employer, with workers finding out about such opportunities through friends or social media.

Participants worked in various industries, including baking (3), domestic care (4), carpentry (2), cleaning (1), construction (1), cooking (3), delivery (1), dishwashing (1), driving (1), electronic security (1), fast food (2), language training (1), logistics - warehouse (1), management (1), retail (1) and welding (1). Migrant workers acquired the skills necessary to do these jobs informally at their workplaces.

Each of these occupations has a distinct set of responsibilities and daily routines. In bakeries, workers typically prepared dough while tending ovens and produced bread and other dough products. Care workers moved between roles throughout the day, combining cooking and cleaning with English language tutoring, and in one instance, picking up children from school. Domestic workers with backgrounds in education were often hired specifically to give English tutoring to the family's children along with domestic work. In such a context, Romanian families would not only get access to cheap domestic services but also, and at no additional cost, high-skilled English tutoring services, which would be very expensive if purchased on the private market. Carpenters focused on measuring, cutting and assembling wooden materials. Welders spent their days producing and joining metal components. Cleaning staff was largely deployed in maintaining short-term tourist accommodations in the city, and were sometimes also asked to drive and to transport other workers, linens and cleaning supplies. The construction worker interviewed here carried out tasks such as cutting iron, drilling and other activities that are mostly low-skill. In kitchens, cooks prepared various dishes according to specific restaurant menus, while shawarma makers followed the fast-food routine of chopping vegetables, assembling orders based on online requests, and passing them to delivery workers. Delivery workers transported food packages, by scooter or bicycle, from restaurants or shops to clients' homes. Dishwashers worked at a catering company serving the Romanian Parliament, handling large volumes of kitchenware. The participant working as a restaurant manager was coordinating staff and the product ordering process. Supermarket employees rotated between shelving products, operating cash registers, and occasionally managing cash. In warehouses, operators scanned packages and moved them to designated locations.

Most workers we interviewed were based in Bucharest. However, three people in the sample mentioned that they had also worked elsewhere in the country for short periods of time, in Deva, Piatra-Neamț, Sibiu and Sinaia.

Findings

'It's a scam': Privatized and unregulated recruitment

Securing a work contract in Romania involved not only employers but also private recruitment firms, which would facilitate migrant workers' employment. Twenty-three participants had used third-party agencies to secure a working contract in Romania. Most of them learned about these agencies by word of mouth, from friends or relatives already working in the country, or from Google advertisements. Some of these agencies were based in their countries of origin and some were Romanian recruitment agencies. For instance, United Recruitment, which is based in Bucharest, recruits low-skilled workers from several countries, including the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nepal and Sri Lanka (United Immigration, n.d.). One participant mentioned that it is often the case that connections between manpower agencies in Romania and similar agencies in Sri Lanka facilitate recruitment:

Actually, in the Sri Lankan agency, this is the procedure if I tell you, if I'm in... I'm working in Romania, and you have a company. And you tell me you need people for your company because I have a manpower company. And you give me, because I bring the people for the manpower company because I have contact with the Sri Lankan agencies. Because I'm a manpower company in Romania. I'm a Romanian guy. Okay, I have contact with the Sri Lankan agencies and I tell them I need these types of people. This is my price. For example, 3,000 euros or 2,500 euros for the price. They will find the people, and they will give the job order.

People waited anywhere from three or four months to one year to receive their Employment Notices and travel visas. Two participants had waited two years and three years respectively for their paperwork due to delays related to the recruitment agency. Only three people stated that their recruitment was quick, ranging from 20 days to two months, from application to arrival in Romania.

Recruitment was expensive. Apart from two workers directly recruited by their employers, who only paid modest visa charges, 23 workers in our sample paid a commission to secure a low-skill working contract in Romania, with wages of 300–350 euros (350–400 USD) per month. This commission ranged from 500 to several thousand euros. Among those paying thousands, one person mentioned paying a sum of 10,200 USD, another paid 9,000 euros, another 7,000 USD dollars; another 5,100 euros; two paid 4,000 euros, one of them exclusive of their travel costs; one person paid 4,300 euros; another 5,000 USD. One person paid 300,000 Indian rupees (approximately 2,700 euros); this same person had to cover their entire travel expenses to Romania, which added another 80,000 rupees (700 euros) to their total costs, much to their disappointment once they found out that their salary would be only 400 USD per month:

I paid 300,000 rupees. It's... I think 3,000 euros. ...They must pay with input for the visa, ticket and everything. But I paid more, an extra 80,000 rupees... 80,000 rupees more. I paid 380,000 rupees for the package. And when I came, my salary was very low. It was 400 dollars... I came here for 400 dollars.

One worker mentioned how they initially agreed with the recruitment agency on a price of 2,500 euros, which was increased to over 4,000 euros once they signed their papers.

Someone else mentioned that they had heard of another person paying fees as high as 7,000 euros to secure a working contract in Romania:

And the guy, basically, he described to me, like at that time, he paid, like, around 7,000 euros, something like that, in order for him to come and work here. Which is quite like a lot of money for people who come and work here. Because that kind of money for example, like in Egypt is a huge amount, and when you look at the whole story you realize it's a scam. Because there is no one here in Romania, I'm talking about how no one in Romania, at a decent workplace, will ask people to pay money to get employed. That's not the case.

Workers understood that they were being charged exorbitantly by these recruitment companies, which often asked for cash commissions so as to avoid a paper trail for their recruitment costs. As described by one worker:

There is an agency in Nepal. One of my friends told me there is an agency in Romania. You can apply. I applied. After one year, I got a work permit and visa. Then I paid 9,000 euro to come to Romania to get a job. But they never take, like a cheque from mobile banking. They take only cash. Because if anything happens, you don't have proof. How can you prove you paid this amount? They are so clever.

Those who relied on recruitment agencies generally did not have to do any other legwork, not even making an appointment at the Romanian embassy to secure their visa, since the process of securing the necessary documentation was handled by the placement agencies.

Most workers paid their own transportation, either directly, or indirectly through recruitment fees, which covered their airplane tickets. Only six workers in our sample said that their employers paid for their flights to Romania.

In one instance, the employer paid for the worker's Employment Notice and their visas, but workers were responsible for paying for their own plane tickets, which cost around 700 euros.

Recruitment costs varied according to where migrants were in their country of origin. Expenses were higher for those from rural or isolated communities, especially when they had to travel long distances to reach recruitment agencies, complete medical tests or attend required training, as in the case of live-in caregivers, for whom recruitment agencies provided training prior to deployment for domestic work abroad. Some people had to take a plane trip simply to connect with their recruitment agencies located in a different province. As described by some of the participants:

But the others, they have paid a lot [more]. Because I live in Mindanao, but the others go, all the agencies, they are travelling to the zone with the airplane. So I started all my, like, medical and everything in the province. So I don't have that many expenses.

I am going back and forth from my place to Manila because the agency is in Manila. So I cannot stay longer in that place because my son is alone in my place, in my province. It takes two hours by airplane. Because I go to training, some separate training in that agency and I also have training in my province. It takes a lot of... I need more time and money.

I am near the Sri Lankan border. From my area to Delhi it's a very long distance. 3,000 km... Yes, 3,000 km. One week I travelled to the Romanian embassy in New Delhi.

One person stated that their recruitment agency booked their flight only a few days prior to the start date of the visa, which meant they could not travel on their scheduled date:

I travelled by car, to Lebanon and it was my first time leaving Syria with a visa. I didn't realize that a visa has a specific start and end date. I sent a picture of the visa to the person handling the travel, and he told me he would book the ticket as soon as possible. I said ok. But he booked the flight five days before the visa start date. When I got to the Lebanese border, they stamped my passport and everything seemed fine. But as I was passing through the checkpoint, a man at the door checked my passport. He told me, 'Your visa hasn't started yet. You can go through here, but once you get to the airport, they'll just send you back.' So, we turned around and went back... He asked me, 'Didn't you see the visa date?' I told him I had no experience with visas. He said it wasn't clear because it was just a picture sent over WhatsApp. I resent the photo through WhatsApp again, this time very clearly, clear as the sun. But still, in the end, I had to pay for the car ride twice.

Six participants took on debt to pay for their recruitment. More often than not, there was no return on the money they invested to come here, since they ended up in different jobs from what they had initially signed up, and at much lower pay. As described by some of them:

Yes, all 3,000 RON [my salary] I send all of them. Actually, for four months now... I would not eat, only coffee [laughing]. I have too many loans. To come here I took a loan. 14 lakhs for coming here. 14 lakhs [approximately 12,000 euros].

You know, the lending for the placement fee to come here. But I have no cash, 70,000 pesos [approximately 1,000 euros] is the fee, so I take what we call lending for six months.

In Sri Lanka I took a loan. A bank loan. I had to pay the money back to this bank. I sent the loan back in two and a half years.

Out of these six participants, one person borrowed money from friends and relatives, and two workers used loan sharks to borrow money to pay their recruitment agency. As described by one of them:

The bank doesn't give me the loan. Because, in Sri Lanka, to get a loan from a bank, it's very difficult. With the documents and guarantees... I took some money from, like, you know, it's not legal. You are a person, you have money, then you get, if I need the money, you give me money for 5% interest for a month, like that, you know... It's dangerous. If you pay interest every month they don't do anything, nothing, normally. But if you don't pay, it's very bad. They come into home and, like that, you know [laughing].

One person described how people sometimes sell their valuables at home in order to get a precarious working contract in Romania, and end up in a situation such that they return home with even less money that they had left with:

You know carabao [swamp-type water buffalo]? It's like a cow in the Philippines where you plough the field, rice field. [People] were selling this, selling land to come here. Spending too much money to come here. And when they come here, they don't have a job. They have, but not the job they are expecting. And the worst is, it's not a permanent job. It's like, okay, today I will send you to the restaurant to help the restaurant. Today I will send you for two hours to the hotel. Because now, many workers, many workers are coming back home for nothing. They come here to work, but they don't have the work that they thought they would have. And worse is, where is the money that they spent to come here, to pay the agency, to pay everything? And then they are coming back without their land anymore, without anything that they sold. It's a sad experience to have.

It was only the live-in caregivers from the Philippines who mentioned that some of their recruitment agencies were registered with the Philippines government. In these cases, the fees paid by the workers seemed to be a lot lower and mainly procedural. As described by one participant:

I know of agencies that are taking a lot of money from the applicants, even if they are still in the Philippines. But in my agency, it's very good because they are not collecting money. We just need to pay like our medical. There are some agents in Manila that are taking money from the applicants. Even if they don't, they are still in Manila, you know. But in my agency, it's really nice because I never give money to the agency. I just give my passport and sign my contract, that's it. And then I pay for my medical, my training, and visa. That's it. And last, when we fly, that's the half of the payment that I need to pay.

Workers mentioned that their recruitment agencies in Sri Lanka were also registered with the government, but in this case the agencies appeared to face little regulation, allowing them to charge whatever commissions they saw fit:

Yeah, they're private... they're private. Yeah, we have many recruitment agencies in Sri Lanka. Many of them are private. No government recruitment agencies. Government recruitment agencies I don't know, government, no. They are registered with the government but no government agencies. They are registered with the foreign ministry, but just private. That's why they're taking too much money.

Two people in the sample did not use recruitment companies. One person came as a student; the other was hired directly by their Romanian employer, who happened to be in their country of origin and offered them the job directly:

Honestly, I didn't know much about Romania, and I hadn't really looked into it. But by coincidence, while I was working at the restaurant, a customer who owned a restaurant in Romania came in regularly. He liked the food I made, got to know me, and eventually offered to handle my paperwork and apply on my behalf. [This was] in Syria. It is the same from the restaurant where I used to work. The customer who comes to us is a restaurant owner in Romania. [He said,] 'I have a restaurant, but I do not have a chef and I want you to make the same food that you are making here, I tasted and I liked it,' and then made me an offer on the basis of which I agreed and applied for my papers. But it took a long time because it was the last period of Covid-19, the situation was very difficult, so I waited for almost a year.

Migrant workers in Romania also came to work for businesses owned by immigrant communities. For instance, one person was a caregiver for a Lebanese family, and three other participants worked for Syrian co-nationals, at a bakery and at restaurants.

Fourteen people in the sample noted that their employer or representatives from their manpower company waited for them at the airport and brought them by company car to their destination. Two people mentioned that no one was waiting for them when they arrived and so they had to get to their destination on their own, by public transport and taxi.

Talking the talk without walking the walk: Mismatched employment contracts

Eight participants mentioned employment conditions different from what they had initially envisioned. Some ended up in a totally different job than the one they applied for or the one listed in their contract. For instance, one person in care work was hired as an English private tutor, but found out only after arriving in Romania that the job also included housework. The participant felt disappointed to discover that the position for which they applied entailed a significantly lower skill level than their professional qualifications:

I applied for the job of private tutor. Okay, private tutor for three children. All girls. Ages one, three, and 10, turning 11. So, when I arrived here, the offer was for a private tutor, but I was disappointed because I thought I would be a teacher, a private tutor. But in the end, I realised that the job is not only about teaching the children, but also doing some household chores. Yeah. I'm doing it. Ironing, washing the clothes.

Others similarly described how once they arrived in Romania they were asked to work in positions that were completely different from what was stated in their contracts:

Job description is a waitress. I applied here as a waitress. But when I came here, I had to work as a bartender and a cleaner also. Because it's written in the contract, avizul de muncă [Employment Notice] is for a waitress. To be honest, I was not expecting this.

It's worse than Dubai, to be honest. First, they told me that the work will be indoors, which is not. Indoor job, okay. In some, in a warehouse or something like that, you must be a helper. But they gave me outdoor work, riding. And it's 12 hours of work on the road, which in my sense is not good work.

Some mentioned how their job not only did not match its description, but was even with an employer other than the one mentioned in the contract. As described by one participant:

They said I can go within six months to Romania, when I gave them my passport in advance. They applied for a job and made a work permit within three months and arranged my interview at the embassy. And next few weeks you can fly to Romania. Then I asked, it's directly to the company or manpower agency like that. They said it's directly to the company, not to the manpower agency. But everything is a lie [laughing]. This is a manpower company I'm working in Romania, and not a direct

company... I will tell you about [how much I paid] in euro. It means 1,200 euro as down payment. Then I waited until three months, four months, six months, no work permit, nothing [awkwardly laughing]. I waited up to one year.

A participant employed by a manpower company was sent to work not only in a job different from the one for which they initially applied, but also in a different city:

Actually, my agency, they cheat, how to say, they lied to me. I came here for delivery, because it's easy for me, the delivery rider job, Tazz or... do you know? But they didn't send me to Timișoara. I came to Timișoara. But they hire, they sell me [to] another company and they choose my job. You need to do this job, like this.

One person mentioned discrepancies in the currency in which they were to be paid, as they were under the impression they would be paid in euros. In fact, it is common in Romania for prices and salaries to be posted in euros or US dollars because of the high-inflation period of the 1990s, when only foreign currencies were stable, but this does not take away from the fact that workers were not informed about the currency in which they would be paid prior to accepting the job. As described by one person:

They told us that the taxes, everything, the company will bear. But when you came here, the story would totally change. Then you found out the currency is totally different. This is the first lie. Okay. Regarding the euro. Then second, because some people like me, who already know that, educated or not educated, who know that there is no euro currency, we understand this thing. But some people who I met, they have this story also. They didn't know about this thing, that there is no euro here. They are only deceived by this lie also, that you will get euro. Anyhow, I have a story that they told me that you will get the net 3,000 lei [RON] per month. The taxes and everything will be borne by the company. Your accommodation, your transportation. But when I came here, they told me you have to pay your taxes on your own.

Some stated that their contracts stipulated that employers would pay their taxes, yet they ended up having to pay the taxes themselves. Discrepancies were also noted in terms of the salaries, which were different, often higher, in the Employment Notices compared to the amounts specified in the actual working permits signed once they were in Romania. There were also discrepancies between their actual pay and the amount listed on the release letter, which often indicated higher amounts (although these might be cases where the workers did not understand the difference between gross and net pay). As detailed by some of them:

The offer letter said 1,750 dollars. This is the offer letter. Then in the working contract they mentioned 3,500 lei [RON] [approximately 750 USD]. So they put a different number in the work contract to pay less taxes.

They also gave me the release paper. It was written that he was paying 3,700 but that was not the truth.

The migrant workers we interviewed received their contracts in Romanian, without a translation, and so they were dependent on employers to explain to them the terms of their contract. The newly adopted OUG 32/2026 will most likely resolve this issue, as it requires employers and recruitment agencies to provide workers with a copy of their contract in English or in their mother tongue.

Three participants in the sample mentioned signing but never receiving their contracts.

It is because of such discrepancies, and the mismatch between what was written on their contract and what was provided to them at the actual job, that one participant likened the system of recruiting and employing migrant workers to human trafficking:

I am telling you, it was human trafficking, but I understand it's not really human trafficking because they said when it is human trafficking, they force you to come here. But for me, it's like human trafficking. Because bringing you here with your knowledge that you will work as a chef, you will work as a hotel cleaner, you will work as any job they offer to you in the Philippines. And when you arrive here, you don't have the specific job. So, for me, it's human trafficking. But they said no.

'Your employer's hand is around your throat': Employer dereliction of duty toward migrant workers

Not all migrant workers in Romania obtain legal status. This is due to the fact that employers are the ones responsible for submitting the documents required for obtaining the migrants' work permits and residency cards. Since employers are sometimes unwilling or unable to complete the necessary paperwork, workers can fall into illegal status, often without even being aware of it. This was the case for one participant, who faced deportation as a result of working without a valid permit, since their employer had not submitted the required documentation within the legally mandated 90-day period. This is how the interviewee described the circumstances surrounding their precarious legal situation:

The problem was the documents. They promised to make it, but no. I always followed up, and they said, 'Oh, we already told the agency like this, and we followed up with the agency,' but the agency... we found out, it expired, my 90 days, we found out that they didn't make it. Yeah, they showed me the documents, how to process, like this, like this, but suddenly the IGI, they didn't accept.[...] Because I already have the interdiction, return decision.

Another participant noted that they knew of people within their community who were residing illegally in Romania under similar circumstances:

[My friend], for years they didn't apply for the documents for her. She worked. But I am so thankful with [name of organisation] who assisted us to help her. Because she has been illegal for four years. [...] She didn't know. She didn't know [she was illegal] because she was working. And she is very innocent when you speak to her. So she didn't know that the employer is not paying taxes for her.

The same interviewee shared that the migrant workers in question only found out they were without legal immigration status when they tried to change employers.

Another participant shared that they knew of people employed without papers who were subjected to exploitative conditions by their employers, including being deprived of adequate food and denied wages:

They were sent to the restaurant, to the hotel to clean, two hours, three hours, like this, and they didn't receive their salary. They said sometimes they were given food, but sometimes not. This is what I understand from them. I really don't know if it is an exaggeration also, because I was not at the actual scene. What I know is that it is true that they are illegal already, and they had to go back to the Philippines.

In Romania, those falling into illegality are issued fines by the IGI, mandatory decisions to return home, and a ban on re-entering the country. The fines depend on the length of the undocumented stay: 400–700 RON (80–140 euros) for migrants who were present illegally for less than 30 days, 600–1,000 RON (120–200 euros) for migrants who stayed illegally for up to 60 days, and 800–1,200 RON (160–240 euros) for those who exceeded their legal stay by over 60 days (OUG 194/2002). Mandatory return decisions are issued by IGI for all those who have overstayed their visas. Entry bans are issued for up to five years depending on the duration of the illegal stay: one year for an illegal stay of up to one year, two years for an illegal stay between one year and two years, and so on. One participant who found themselves undocumented described the anguish they felt when confronted with their return decision:

I was afraid when I went to IGI last Friday. Because I'm alone. Maybe they will catch me or they will hold me inside. They will not allow me to come out again. Because I went there alone. To take the... the paper. The return decision... I was scared and I was afraid maybe they would not allow me to come out. Yeah. Because they held my passport. They took my passport when I came here to the IGI office. I came to ask about my status. And then they said... They asked me, 'pașaportul sau permisul de ședere?' [Where is your passport or residence permit?]? And then I give this to... And then they give me some form to sign like that. And then I sign. And then it took two hours. Two hours for the staff from inside the office. And they said, 'Pay this penalty and come back this time.' I went there at 8 o'clock in the morning. And then I finished around 8 in the evening. 400 lei. For the interdiction. Six months interdiction.[...] If I want to come back, I need to finish this six months. Yeah, and I want to clean my name. I don't want to stay illegally here.

One person described how employers often tell people to leave without even paying their salaries or securing the workers' flights back home, despite their contractual obligations, and how they knew of co-workers and co-nationals who ended up without even anywhere to sleep until they secured their travel back home:

Papers, yes, without salary, and they will tell you out, to get out. So, then the worker, most of the time workers are, you know, we don't know where to let them sleep. We don't know where to bring them. So sometimes, 'Please, can I sleep one day with you? Can I sleep one day like this?' until they can manage to buy a ticket. Worst of all, they are buying their own ticket to go back home. But in the contract, it was specified the ticket should be shouldered by your employer. The ticket should be shouldered like this. Do you understand me?

The undocumented person we interviewed described the brutality with which they and their fellow undocumented workers were told to leave their accommodation, using the threat of the immigration police:

After we are undocumented already, and they kick us out of the accommodation, like one day, you need to leave. They kicked us... they scared us, like they will bring a police officer to kick us out. So, at that moment, we leave the accommodation, we stay with our friends.

Another interviewee described their distress after their company terminated their employment, leaving them without a valid residency permit and facing extreme financial distress, homelessness and possible deportation:

They told me, if you don't sign the paper, I will be deported to Nepal. I had no option. They also told me you can get new job from this paper. Doesn't mean it's okay if I will get a new job and I will sign. Now I have to leave the accommodation. Now I was crying, where I can go? Even I don't have any friend. In two months, I don't know more about Romania. Where I can go? Where I can take the bus? Where I can stay? There is one Nepali people who got the number of agent. You can go to this agent, they will give you job and maybe will take some charges. Okay, we did, but I need job. Because now I don't have accommodation, don't have food. I hope I will get job. But when I'm showing my document, where is your temporary residency permit? I was told, I don't have temporary residency permit. So it was sorry, you don't get job without temporary residency permit. You do nothing in Romania. I was shocked. From morning, I didn't eat anything. Just I was like, I will die.

Five people in our sample found themselves in situations where their employers did not submit the paperwork for their work permits. This left them scrambling to secure other employment, with their second employer assisting them in signing their release letters from the first employer. One person, whose employers failed to secure her residency within the 90-day window described her desperation and how she begged them to finish her paperwork, to no avail:

I knew that without a residency permit can't get a job, so I went back to the company office. They told me, 'Why you came here?' and I was then saying 'Please, I'm requesting you without the residency permit I can't get a job in Romania, please take me back. I will do anything. Please make my document, without a document I can't do anything.' I'm crying but they're merciless. I was telling 'Sir, think about me. I was... [Do you have] daughter or son, think about like, how can I go back to Nepal now? I have multiple loans, how can I pay?'

And someone else described how they were left scrambling for work when the company they had been working for went bankrupt:

I was working for six months in the same company. The company had some tax issues, and it got closed. At that time, they told me to go to the other front company, front hotel, like this. You will work here for some maintenance, you will work for three months. After that, I will start a new company.

Five participants reported that employers used the 90-day window as an unofficial probation period. This

increased their anxiety regarding their residency status. As explained by one person:

If you are newly hired, they said this is good because 90 days for the worker to say no and 90 days for the employer to say no if there is no match, no chemistry at all. But for us workers, it's difficult. It's difficult to say, 'I don't want to continue with you because you are not good. I don't have chemistry with you.' We will not do this. Why? Because the rule of immigration is that if you do not have one year with your employer, you do not have the right to transfer to another employer. So for us, we just want to continue to work. Just to work for whoever hired us. That's it.

Two people mentioned that some employers do not even apply for the workers' residency permit, tricking them into signing their resignation papers within the 90-day window in order to avoid paying them. As described by some:

The employer sometimes, they don't apply for your temporary residency permit, they don't pay your taxes. Sometimes they even have the signatures already on your resignation paper for their own safety, because you don't study the context properly. It's in Romanian, when you sign sometime. You don't know, maybe your resignation paper is already signed. And at the time if you make any trouble for the company, they will just throw you out. What will you do?

After two months, there was force. You have to sign this paper. I was thinking, what can I do? I don't know what is written in Romanian language. I was shocked, I didn't do anything. They told me, 'If you don't sign paper, I will deport you to Nepal.' I had no option. They also told me you can get new job from this paper.

Employers being solely responsible to secure workers' residency permits also resulted in the anomalous situation of employers forging migrant workers' signatures on official documents to take to IGI on their behalf. As described by the participant who mentioned this scenario:

Yes, the first company, we resigned. Because they submitted all of our documents without our consent, without our sign. They submitted our contract without our signatures. Yeah, they signed from their behalf on our behalf. How come they submitted our contract to IGI? They do not have our consent. They signed on our behalf without informing us.

Three participants asked for a release letter from their employers. Two of them said that their employer readily agreed to this, but the third encountered issues when asking their employer to sign it:

Yes, [she was] very angry. She said that I didn't finish my contract. I gave it to her, but she didn't sign it. So I had a lot of problems with that. Because at that time, I didn't have any papers with her that they released me. I am grateful for working with her family, I told her, but I cannot take it any longer. I'm very stressed. It affected [my] health.

Even after the initial year had passed and workers were free to pursue different employment avenues, some were still afraid of asking for their release letter. As described by one participant:

I was afraid if I didn't stay with him for a year, you know that I need handwritten consent from him, so I was afraid that he would not give it to me. When a year passed, I happened to find a job and I told him I found a job and he said, 'Okay, goodbye.' I told him I wanted to sign my resignation. He said not now, when 20 days pass, now he wanted 20 days from me. Knowing that he never gave me holidays, meaning that the entire period that I stayed with him he never gave me days off, I worked every day. He didn't want to sign my resignation until 20 days passed. I told him I will complain about you to the ITM. He called me and said, 'Go, do what you want to do. Neither the ITM nor the president nor the minister or anyone can do something about this.' I told him, 'Okay, no problem we will see if they can or not.' The second day he called me he said, 'Come take your salary,' which he still had to pay me. I went there, and I found a dozen papers that he wanted me to sign which said that at this date I finished working.

When asked about circumstances in which their employment contracts are respected, 18 participants in our sample stated that this is entirely dependent on the employer. As explained by one of the workers:

It depends on the employer if they are good. For example, for my contract, it says I was entitled for annual vacation with salary, with pay ticket. But some of my colleagues didn't have this, so they cut that part. Yes.

Two participants mentioned that their employers withheld their passport or their ID, and were told that this was the company policy. One person described how they reported this to the police:

I say, I do not give them my ID. I gave the passport no problem. After he says, 'Okay, you will not give me ID, you go,' I left. [The employer replied,] 'Okay, you go.' It was night, eight o'clock, he called me, 'Go now, you go' [i.e., leave the accommodation]. Then, I called the police, police came. They arranged for one hotel, one day, I was waiting there. After the next day they give me my salary and passport and everything.

Another person related how they refused to give in to their employer's request, explaining that the employer wanted to withhold their documents to ensure they did not run away:

At first, she wanted to take all my documents, but she had my passport when I arrived. She took it, my passport and everything, because I know it's not allowed. It's not legal. But when I waited for six months, when I went in immigration to have my residence permit, when I got my ID, she asked me where is my ID. And I directly told her that no, the police immigration told me that I will not even give my employer all my documents because they are my personal [belongings]. Maybe she's afraid, because every Filipino ran away from her house. [...] That's the reason [why she is retaining IDs], I think.

Having their legal residency in Romania tied to their employers created an unsafe environment for workers, which made them feel they cannot leave freely, that whatever they do they are always 'under them', that is, under their employers' control. As one person put it, 'your employer's hand is around your throat' for as long as you depend on them for residency.

Long hours, low pay and predatory work

Migrant workers described their occupational conditions as demanding, and characterised by long working hours with insufficient breaks, few or no days off, and low wages.

Although the Romanian Labour Code stipulates an eight-hour shift as the working standard, only one participant in our sample indicated that their schedule conformed to this standard. All others reported working much longer hours. In the words of some participants:

I have different shifts. 9.00 to 21.00, 11.00 to 23.00, 12.00 to 00.00, 15.00 [to] early morning 3.

We're not doing the eight-hour job. We start at 9.00 and we end up at 20.00 and 21.00 in the evening.

Then, the manager who came, told us, this is like that. You will have to work 12 hours per day. You will get a bus card and transport. Like that.

Five participants stated that they worked overtime. The others did not call their long working hours overtime, but described it as general 'working time' with the schedule consisting of long working hours. A participant who worked overtime stated that they were not compensated for the extra hours because they did not work overtime every working day over the entire month:

One interesting thing I was telling you, like, I was working overtime every day, three hours one day, four hours, another day. Okay? After a month when I got my salary, I asked where my overtime money was. When I asked, they [the employer] answered that overtime means working overtime the whole month [every day]. Only then I will get paid [i.e., when they work overtime on a daily basis]. Like, if you work 20 days over time, and you do not do overtime for two or three days you will not get paid for your overtime [done that month]. [...] When I asked the manager they said 'You have to sign, this is the policy.'

The average full-time working time in Romania is 38.8 hours per week (Eurostat, 2025). In contrast, the working schedules of our participants averaged more than 50 hours of work per week, exceeding not only the legal definition of full-time work (40 hours per week), but also the prescribed maximum of 48 hours per week inclusive of overtime.

The Romanian Labour Code states that employees working more than six hours a day are entitled to break time at work. Out of the 15 participants who discussed their break times, 13 stated that they got their breaks. They mentioned an average break time of 30 minutes up to a maximum of one hour. In two cases, participants took a lunch break as well as a 15-minute break in the morning before lunch. Two participants stated that they could not take their break due to pressure from the employer to continue working:

And for the one-hour break, we had an argument with that. Because we cannot take our lunch break. Because they want us to finish all the tasks, all the routes that they want us to go.

I work in a bakery, there is food, so we eat a little while we are working, but there is no meal break, meaning that this isn't meal break time.

The Romanian Labour Code stipulates that workers have the right to two days off per week, but among our participants, only 11 received two days off per week. Seven only had one day off per week, and the rest did not comment on the numbers of days off they received.

One worker described taking a stand against their employer when they demanded they go into work on their day off:

One time, last week, I raised my voice to them. Because Sunday is my day off. So we were waiting in the accommodation and we were sleeping. One of the supervisors came from the hotel and he asked the guys to come. There will be some work in the hotel you have to do. It will be half an hour. So at that time I got very mad at that one. So I said to my supervisor, 'Today is Sunday and it is a holiday for us. So, in the holiday you are not paying us supplementary. So it's not a good thing you are doing.' I said that. After that, all the people, our friends, our colleagues said, 'Okay, we go and do it and come.' We went and worked nearly 40 minutes. Then after that we came.

Two other workers mentioned being asked to work on statutory holidays. Neither received any days off during their working week in compensation.

Days off were used by the migrant workers for rest and recovery. For those from the Filipino community, Sundays were also dedicated to attending a local Catholic church in Bucharest.

Vacation time was a luxury for most migrant workers. Only two workers in our sample, who were au pair workers, took paid vacation time during their stay in Romania. In the case of one of these workers, the cost of their plane tickets was covered by their employer.

Participants mentioned different pay scales according to the industry in which they were working and the job they performed. Most of their salaries ranged between 3,000 and 3,300 RON (600–660 euros) in most industries (baking, carpentry, cleaning, dishwashing, driving, retail, food service). Three migrant workers received higher wages, between 1,000 and 1,200 euros; these workers were doing skilled work, such as welding, cooking and security alarm installation.

Workers' salaries were paid either in cash or by direct deposit into their bank account. Workers reported that their salaries were paid on time, with only two exceptions.

In 2024, the minimum monthly wage in Romania was 3,700 RON (740 euros), while the minimum net pay was 2,363 RON (472 euros). Although migrant workers received wages that were slightly above the level of the Romanian minimum wage, their salaries were insufficient to cover their daily living expenses. For instance, the so-called living wage for Romania, defined as covering the cost of the minimum consumption basket, was set in 2024 at 3,972 RON net (795 euros) per month for a single adult (FES, 2024). And while the argument can be made that Romanian citizens also have the same low wage levels, the difference is that Romanian workers can shop around for higher pay, whereas migrant workers do not have the same freedom to do so, since their residency in the country is dependent on their employer.

However, some of our participants did not even receive minimum wage. One person was paid 13 RON per hour, which was lower than the minimum wage of 15 RON per hour, stating that to make 2,500 RON per month, they needed to 'work like a robot. More than eight hours, more than five days for the week'.

Four participants were victims of wage theft, either never receiving their pay or having their pay withheld for months. As described by some of them:

The company didn't give the salary. So, the first three months they didn't... First, second, third [month] we don't have a salary. We work only, we work 12 to 14 hours a day, once a week day off, and we don't have a salary.

Like two months, because he is struggling to pay our salary. He said that if you want to resign, resign. And then we all decided to resign. Forcibly resign. We are 14, all Filipinos.

One person went unpaid and was constantly avoided by their employer, but finally got their salary after they threatened to report their employer to the ITM:

Coincidentally, he only showed up once a week. He told me, 'I know you're annoyed with your salary. From the minute I see your face, I can tell you're upset.' I told him, 'My salary is my right.' The shop was a bit inactive, but I said that was not my problem. 'You're the manager. You're a capable man.' He told me he couldn't pay his rent. I said, 'What does your rent have to do with me?' Honestly, if you saw this person, it would be impossible to think he's renting a house. God bless him, but we have nothing to do with his personal problems. If he has money, he should pay other people. He's a very rich man. Just by looking at him, you'd know he has money. But why he doesn't pay others, nobody knows... I asked before and I knew that when I bring up the ITM, I am speaking from a place of deserving, I am not asking him for anything more, I deserve my salary that he didn't give me and I wanted my days off. That he gives me 20 days off it's my right.

Three participants undertook additional jobs to supplement their income. One of these participants took cleaning jobs on their day off, one was doing massages in their free time, and the third was collecting bottles to earn extra money for food. As stated by one of them:

But sometimes we collect the bottles, you know [laughing]. The ... returnable bottles with money. [...] Some places have some bottles in the garbage and like that we collect the bottles [laughing] and put them into the machine and take the slip, go to the back, the supermarket and buy some food sometimes [laughing]. Okay. This is to collect some extra money, but it's not too much. Just maybe... Sometimes just 30 lei for a week.

Most of the time participants were unable to save money, since they were sending home 90% of what they earned, primarily to support their families but also to pay the debts they incurred in securing their working contracts in Romania.

Asked about additional employment benefits, seven participants mentioned public transit cards provided by their employers. These were priced at 80 RON (16 euros) per month and allowed for travel on all modes of transport run by the Bucharest Transportation Company (STB). Two participants mentioned that their employer reimbursed them for the cost of a taxi when they worked night shifts and were unable to make it home using the last available public transport.

One person whose job required frequent travel across the city to the different accommodation facilities where they were performing cleaning duties had to cover these expenses out of their own pocket, since the employer did not provide public transportation subsidies:

And for how many months, they didn't give us an abonament [monthly ticket], so we paid the fare expenses going from one apartment to another apartment for metro and bus.

Another participant reported helping their employer who owned a cleaning company by washing and ironing all the linens at their own residence, thus also covering the associated energy expenses:

I've been washing all the linens in my place for almost seven months. Even at night, midnight, I don't mind because I wanted to help them. After work in the morning, preparing all the sheets and cleaning and washing at night, I don't mind because I told her I will help them with everything. For six months, it's been in my place before they found a laundry shop.

Six participants stated they had received Edenred Meal Cards from their employers to cover their food expenses, while two others indicated that food was provided to them by their employers at the workplace, since they were working in the food industry. The meal cards (*Carduri de Masă*) work as an electronic food voucher; they are prepaid and can be used to purchase meals and food products from a variety of supermarkets, restaurants and food delivery platforms. The meal cards were a discretionary benefit provided by some employers, and did not constitute a required benefit. The migrant employees would get a physical card with a predefined monetary value, in our sample ranging from 300 to 600 RON monthly (approximately 60–120 euros), which was generally valid until the end of the calendar year.

Of the two workers who received food allowances, one mentioned that provision of these allowances was delayed when they first arrived in the country:

After we came here, after one month and a half, they gave us our food allowance, but they made an instalment, like, 20 euro, supposed to be 100 euro per month. So, they give us 20 euro, 50 euro per month. They make instalments. So how can we survive?

Twelve people in our sample mentioned that they were provided with uniforms and other work equipment, including shirts, gloves and safety footwear, as required by national occupational safety standards, free of charge.

Two groups of workers that face distinct sector-specific occupational issues are the au pair and delivery workers.

Au pairs worked for wages ranging from 3,000 to 6,000 RON (600–1,200 euros) per month, typically receiving no benefits other than room and board. The wage variance among caregivers in our sample stemmed from various factors: the year of entry into Romania, continued employment with stagnant wages, lack of wage negotiation and employer reluctance to increase pay.

Workers in the care sector tend to work six days a week, mirroring their employers' schedules. Their day starts early, before their employer wakes up, to prepare for a smooth morning, making breakfast, ironing, etc. They continue with domestic chores, such as cleaning and cooking, throughout the day, and go to sleep late, after finishing dinner preparation and dinner-related cleaning. Their effective working time is therefore difficult to calculate, but most likely it easily exceeds eight hours per day. Sunday is the only free day for care workers, but in the case of one participant they got only a weekly 12-hour break on Sundays. Thus, it is the structure of their employment setup – in particular the fact that the workers live at their employer's house – that makes it such that domestic migrant workers lack proper breaks and days off, as they are required to be available upon request, even above the eight-hour per day working norm stipulated by the Romanian Labour Code.

Delivery workers also form a distinct category of migrant workers. They tend to be hired by a subcontracting company which is itself contracted by online delivery platforms, such as Glovo or Tazz Courier. These subcontracting companies generally provide scooters or bicycles for a fee or through a lease, while the thermal bags needed for deliveries and protective equipment (helmets, winter jackets etc.) are provided by the delivery platforms. Courier companies pay the subcontracting firms that employ the delivery workers. The subcontractor then deducts rental fees and commissions from the delivery workers before paying them (Meseşan et al., 2023).

One delivery worker interviewed described how their monthly pay is calculated following this model: rent for their scooters, a commission to the subcontracting company (a rough estimate of 1,300 RON/260 euros accrued from multiple orders), and rent for accommodations were all deducted:

I have to pay like 1300 RON [260 euro] per month [for accommodation]. And then 1,000 RON [200 euro] for the scooter. [...] Okay. 1,200 RON [250 euro] is also commission for the company. Because they are making us, [...] We need to pay them. Even if we make like 6,000 RON [1100 euro], there is nothing left in our hands. With 300 euro [1,500 RON].

Delivery workers do not have a specific work schedule, since their jobs are highly dependent on the delivery schedule of restaurants and shops. The more they work, the more they are paid, leading to them often working more than 12 hours per day and with no days off. One of the delivery workers interviewed described how their shift starts around 10.00 am and ends around midnight, delivering up to 20 food orders. Breaks are generally an anomaly for delivery workers, since they cover long distances, in some cases up to 10 km, from one neighbourhood to another, leaving them no spare time.

'I will chop you up, put you in a box and send you to the Philippines': Dangerous, risky and abusive work

For some migrant workers, their employment in Romania can involve abusive treatment, and for some it is an unsafe environment.

Four migrant workers in the sample experienced violence. One of them, who worked as a domestic care worker, described being threatened with a knife by their employer's partner when they attempted to intervene in a domestic dispute:

He holds a knife like this, and his eyes are red. And then he knocks on my door. Give me my children. Give me my daughters. And I told him, 'But sir, they are sleeping.' 'No, give me my daughter.' He grabbed the daughter, one here, one here, and then ran. Only two. The elder, no. I don't know why. Only two. And he left the house. So I shouted, 'Sir!' because I believe the children are in danger. So I said, 'Where are you going? Stop.' [He said:] 'Don't move, otherwise, I will chop you up, put you in the box and send you to the Philippines.' [...] But I stayed because of the children. I was afraid that this guy would hurt the children.

The same participant recounted an incident in which the employer's partner entered her room nude under the pretext of requesting hygiene products. The episode ended with the employer trying to cool down the situation, explaining to the partner that the care worker is Filipino and conservative. As described in the participant's words:

Okay, one day we were in Constanța like this, and then I didn't know about him. He's her boyfriend. And then he arrived in my room like this. Do you have a towel? Yes, I have a towel. But when I looked down, he's nude.

Another participant reported an incident of sexual harassment. He described a situation where, while employed as a care worker in the same household with his wife, the participant was assigned to outdoor tasks and prohibited from entering the employer's house. Meanwhile, his wife was assigned to indoor work, and the employer made an inappropriate request by asking her to massage his 'sensitive parts'.

One live-in caregiver described ending up with anxiety and depression because of the verbal abuse of their employer, who was endlessly dissatisfied with all their work:

Her husband is kind. They are a rich family. But later, after I came into their family, after one week, I observed her character. She keeps shouting every morning and all the time without... You don't know what your mistake is. And even throwing some things, like when you're washing. If she doesn't like how you wash, she's throwing it on the floor. The clothes... I suffered anxiety and depression. I encountered her when she had a lot of high-society friends coming to visit her. And she's shouting [to me] in front of the people [crying]. I'm sorry. But I'm trying to finish everything, not to have problems [crying]. Sorry. Her husband is nice, I cannot say anything. But I don't know, she has some problems that I don't know. And I am the fifth Filipina working there in that family. But the fourth Filipina only worked for three months for her.

Two participants detailed additional violent episodes in which they or other workers were accused of stealing:

It was supposed to be two years, but I resigned. I took a resignation letter, that one, because my employer is not good. For example, in December, I have a party. And then the lady, my employer, she thinks that I take the wine, that one. But I did not take the wine. I cannot drink. And then my employer, my past employer, asked me, I don't believe you. So, I was scared. So I just resigned.

Employees are being accused of stealing money. Most of them are accused of stealing Rolex, money, and everything, then publicly humiliated for [accused of] stealing money. But they [employees] are crying so much. They said they didn't do anything. But they said that they are accused because they said they want to leave the family and they want to transfer to another family. So, our evaluation is that they don't like the worker to leave the house and they accuse like stealing.

One participant mentioned that they felt unsafe working in the food delivery industry, driving on a scooter in Bucharest, without training on Romanian driving regulations:

Because being on the road for 12 hours, I don't think it's really safe. And especially the traffic and everything is fast and heavy roads. And the bikes, you are not allowed to drive more than 50 kilometres per hour here in Romania. Especially scooters. So it's hard.

The same person witnessed a road accident involving a fellow migrant delivery worker:

Being on the road with the sound of so many heavy cars it's not easy. I even saw an accident in front of me when I came. It was in the first week of work and in front of Veranda Mall I saw an accident. The boy was hit by a truck, and he died on the spot. He was a Sri Lankan guy. Of course, this is not a safe and good job to do.

Only five participants stated that they received training prior to starting their job, while only one mentioned that they completed health and safety training.

It was only those working as caregivers, who were from the Philippines, who mentioned that they had to take training for their jobs. The *Technical Education and Skills Development Act* of 1994 in the Philippines, known as the TESDA Act, implemented national occupational skills standards in the caregiving industry; private industry groups and trade associations were accredited to certify workers in what is called Caregiving NC II, a qualification signifying mastery of basic competencies in provision of domestic care (Technical Education and Skills Development Authority [TESDA], n.d.). As described by one participant:

Before all Filipinos go abroad everywhere in the world, we have to, we need to train... on the bed settings and the food to cook, everything. We need to train for 15 days before we come. We have some agencies that we need to pay [for this training]. So you have to train for like 15 days. And then the government will give you their certificate. Like NC II.

Asked about inspections, seven migrant workers stated that their workplaces were inspected by governmental agencies. They could not identify those agencies specifically by name, but most likely these included IGI, ITM and the Public Health Directorate (DSP). IGI generally verifies workers' immigration papers to ensure that they have proper residency status and are not working illegally; ITM generally verifies compliance with the Labour Code and assesses whether the rights of workers are being respected; and DSP is responsible for implementing sanitary regulations and ensuring that food and hospitality companies abide by food safety and handling standards. It appears, however, that most controls were undertaken by DSP and IGI and that there was nothing monitored with regard to working conditions. As described by one participant:

They come in there, they check everything. Like the first time they control the food, they check everything. If they have expired or something like that. Of course, they check everything there. And it's very clean. I don't know, because they have specific documents that we need to check and everything. And the head chef communicates very well in Romanian language. And we stay only continuous in our work. And my chef guides them to check everything that they need. And then, the second time they come for the documents, they check where they got there. We have IDs, we have

documents for working visas, things like that. And the employers provide them and they show everything that we need.

Falling on deaf ears: Workers' complaints largely ignored

Participants described three channels for filing workplace complaints. These included internal discussions with management or employers, raising their concerns directly within the company (seven participants); contacting local non-governmental organisations to seek external support (11 participants); and directly approaching Romanian state authorities, initiating formal legal complaints (12 participants). Internal complaints and appeals to government authorities were seen as risky by the participants due to the coercive power both the employers and the state hold over migrant workers, employers through their ability to deny work and the state through control over their residency status. Conversely, NGOs were viewed as safe actors, posing fewer risks and offering protection.

Five participants mentioned feeling fearful about filing complaints against their employers. They were afraid of having their contract terminated and being forced to return home. As stated by some of them:

To be honest, in my company I would not... Okay. I have heard that some boys have done some protests. After one week they have cancelled their work permits. Okay, without telling them and after one month they informed the immigration, and immigration came in the night and took them and with the false accusations.

I was afraid that he [the employer] would cancel my residency or cause problems for me, I didn't understand the law here. I was afraid that he would cause me problems or reduce my salary or tell me, 'Go, may God be with you.'

One participant mentioned that even if complaints were submitted to government authorities, they largely remained unaddressed:

Yeah, we complained before, but nothing happened in ITM. We complained before, lots of us, we complained about our salary, but the company didn't do anything. And some of us, we resigned.

One worker described how they launched a complaint with AJOFM, the regional labour agency, which resulted in the state agency fining their employer for unpaid wages. Yet despite the fine, they still never received their wages, the only good result being that they got the release letter to find another place to work:

I asked someone. I asked for some help, but... nothing also. Nothing happened. We went before the labour [authority] for our salary. Yeah, to the government. The one handling the salary here. That AJOFM... They said that they will... like, follow up this company to force them to give our salary. I think they fined this company. They fined them 10,000 euro. Yeah. 10,000 euros. But the problem is the company, after they paid the fines, they did not give our salary. They gave us only the release.

Another interviewee added that government authorities favour employers over migrants when they launch complaints:

Because see the... If the police are just listening to them and the labour law and the immigration is just listening to them.

For migrant workers, the safest choice for attempting to have their grievances addressed was local NGOs. Unlike employers or state authorities, NGOs do not have repressive or punitive power over workers, which reduces their risks of retaliation, job loss, or any legal consequences, such as deportation. Moreover, NGO workers are often viewed as offering not only practical advice and free assistance but also empathy, support and confidentiality. Some participants discussed reaching out to an NGO:

Every problem needs the right person or authority to solve it. It depends on the nature of the issue. If it's a medical problem, of course I wouldn't go to the police. And if it's a legal or security matter, I wouldn't go to [the NGO]. But if it's something purely humanitarian, then I would definitely turn to [the NGO].

Honestly, [the NGO] has helped me a lot. They made things easier for me and didn't charge any fees. In the beginning, when I submitted my documents, I also included my mother's papers. At that time, I was even looking for people who could help me with the process just to make an appointment, but everyone wanted money for it.

If it is between me and a stranger, I will of course go first to the employer, to know what I should do now, so he will tell me, and I will follow his advice. If there is a problem with the employer, I prefer to come to [the NGO].

It was not only NGOs that participants sought advice from, but also the informal networks within their immigrant communities, such as the Filipino community, which is one of the oldest migrant worker communities in Romania. These informal initiatives, aimed at providing mutual support, are centred on a local Catholic church set up by the Filipino community, which functions as a meeting space on Sundays, when community members attend mass and discuss their challenges. Members of the Filipino community who have been in Romania for longer, and often possess secure immigration status (permanent residency or citizenship) play a supportive and mentoring role by offering guidance to newer migrants, generally through a Filipino-centred migrant support group, as well as assistance with language and other forms of support. As stated by one of the Filipino workers interviewed in our sample:

For example, FILROM, it's a community... We put on training, like we assist to educate in order to protect. Actually, it's from FRSG, Filipino in Romania Support Group. FRSG. But I don't know, people just call it FILROM, Filipino in Romania Support Group. Our main vision is to remove these barriers that make workers run away, because I understand their problems. And while some workers are being maltreated, others simply do not understand [their rights], or they cannot [communicate] with their employer, it's not because the employer is bad. It's because some employers cannot speak English. These [language barriers] I also experienced in Dubai, Arab Emirates, where English [proficiency] gets difficult. So we decided to collaborate and to provide this Romanian language class for example.

'It's like hell': Overcrowded, inadequate and expensive accommodation

Participants lived in various housing arrangements, from shared apartments to designated migrant workers accommodations or dormitory-style buildings provided by their employers.

It was common for people to change their accommodation multiple times as they switched jobs. Fourteen people in our sample changed their living arrangements during their contracts: three caregivers resided in accessory dwelling units on their employers' property or in a separate house nearby, while the other caregivers interviewed lived in their employers' house; 11 people resided in apartments, four in houses, one in a container, two in the same building in which they worked, and five in dormitory-style buildings. One interviewee stating their building was a former hospital, and three interviewees likening these buildings to migrant camps, hostels or student dormitories under the auspices of universities (though there have been no public accounts of universities in Bucharest housing migrant workers). Participants were most likely describing the former single-occupancy room projects which commonly housed unmarried workers during the communist era, especially for short periods when they were changing cities for work and were waiting for the state to assign them an apartment. There have been accounts of private entities purchasing such accommodations in order to rent them to migrant workers (Hotnews, 2025).

While most people interviewed changed their accommodation multiple times, one person in particular changed their living arrangements several times within their first weeks of arriving in Romania:

He waited for me at the airport and took me to his friend's house first. Two days later, his friend arrived, so I had to move to another house. I stayed there for another two days, then moved to a third house, but that was only for one day. After that, I was transferred to a hotel for two days, and then to another house for about three days. Finally, I moved into the house where I ended up staying. During all this, I had my luggage with me. I took it to the shop and brought it back from the shop. I was constantly going up and down the stairs because not all of the buildings had elevators. Sometimes we had to go up to the fourth or even the fifth floor. I had to carry my bags up and down every time.

Overcrowding was a common theme. Except for live-in caregivers, who generally had their own private room, most participants, 18 in our sample, described instances of overcrowded accommodations, this despite signing contracts which stated that no more than two people would be housed per room:

It's like hell. Because they don't have... Actually, I will tell you because they don't have my name. They don't have a cupboard. I put my clothes in the garbage bag. They have one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Eight people like this in two rooms. Two rooms like this [gesturing with their hands]. One and a half [around 6x5 m]. They have two beds, two beds, two beds, two beds. Like that [gesturing]. Eight people for one room. One room and one bathroom. It's an old building. It seems like more than 100 [years old]. It's very old, very, very, very old. It's very cheap. Very cheap. They get it for the cheap price and they have... How do I say this? They do it to earn money, that company. And I fight with them for accommodation but I can't do anything.

We are 16 people, 16 ladies in one apartment. Three rooms, like we are six in the room, seven, crowded, and a small kitchen, one bathroom. First come, first served [laughing]. Yeah, first come, first served, especially in the bathroom and in the kitchen... Like some of the, like in one room we had two single beds and then some of us were on the floor... Like we have four mattresses, yeah. Like sardines. In the contract they said that they provide accommodation like two people in one room.

Those sharing apartments reported living arrangements ranging from one to two people per room, for example in a three-bedroom apartment, to as many as 10 or 11 people in a room, while those living in larger dwellings reported being housed with 38 people, or even up to 50. There was not just the issue that they were crammed with a dozen people per room, but also that everyone had to share singular amenities, for instance, one kitchen, stove, and washroom facility. In these cases, people were forced to sleep together regardless of sex, or on the floor. As stated by some of the participants:

They provided us accommodation in Piața Romană [Roman Square] but it was very, very bad accommodation. Mixed. We are mixed. We are crowded like 11. In a studio room. Not even a room. Like one area only. Kitchen, bathroom. Sleeping on the floor. [We managed] by sleeping together, like men and women.

Yes. One accommodation for 50 people. And rooms have, ah, my room is 10 people. One, one room, no kitchen, only washroom. With two beds [bunk beds]. For the first month. No... for two months. Now [at the new accommodation] my room has four people. And the other rooms have 10 people. The [entire] accommodation here has 35 people. No AC, no hot water. One washroom. One kitchen.

We have one fridge. The fridge is full, every time. Every time, 38, 38 people have one fridge [laughing]. No space. And only one washroom.

Container... Container... one room for five, no six people. Six people in one room. Double bed, six people. So one toilet for six people or more.

One person mentioned 300 people living in a hostel-type accommodation, typically with 24 people per room, and all 300 of them sharing one kitchen. As stated by the participant:

There are 300 people in one building. In one room, there are 24 people. There is a kitchen. If you're going to make the food, we have to queue for one hour. Like your duty time is 10 o'clock. We have to wake up at 6 o'clock and make a queue for food. Because there are 300 people and there is one kitchen.

Someone else who lived with 30 other people described how they had their bed assigned to a hallway which they would cover with a bed sheet for privacy:

Thirty persons in the accommodation. In my room, well it is not a room, like in a corridor, the two beds are there, bunk beds, in the corridor. [So people from other rooms] just enter the corridor [nervously laughing]. We covered it... with a bed sheet. I covered that place.

In another instance, a participant stated that they were not even provided with bed sheets or pillows where they were housed, and that they had to purchase them.

Those living in what they described as dormitory-style buildings, which would host migrants working for the same employer or industry, similarly reported inadequate and insect-infested housing, with inoperable stoves and unhygienic toilet facilities. As detailed by one participant:

If you go there, some camps are the worst. Worst for the living. You cannot even use the washroom. I don't know how people are surviving. I will show you. That's the worst thing I have ever experienced. [shows a video on his phone]. This is the bad thing, the cockroaches are running here, all over ... And this is the stove and the guys are... the same that you can see the cockroaches. I think it is a disgusting place. And this is a storeroom, I think. Somewhere here they have a room. This garbage area. Okay. This is the bed they gave me. This rubbish mattress. Okay. And this is a hell of a mess around here. I don't know where to accommodate my things. And my stuff. And, how to keep my privacy here? And this is their washroom without a door. Okay. So, please let me know. I don't know how to live here. So this is the conditions of the Romanian migrant labour workers camps.

Another person compared their accommodation to a pigeon coop, stating that they are not even able to cook at home, because so many people were sharing the kitchen and because there would be no gas for the stove, and so they were forced to eat with their friends living elsewhere or they would eat out. This person contemplated returning home:

Because we don't have a choice. But I decided before. I'm done. It's enough. I thought, I'm done. I don't need this. I don't need a life like this because I have everything in Sri Lanka. Everything. I have a good house. I had a good job before. I have everything. But now I came here, I'm nothing. I can't buy new clothes now because I don't have space to put them there. I can't buy new shoes because I don't have a space to live there. So I thought before, I decided before. I'm going to Sri Lanka. I had enough of this country.

Two participants detailed being housed on the basis of nationality. One person mentioned being separated on gender lines, and one being housed with co-workers. Three people were housed with migrant workers of different nationalities. Having people from different countries of origin in overcrowded accommodations often led to fights. One person also described language barriers when sharing their housing with people from different countries:

And he [the employer] brought me to the apartment and said to me, he showed me one room. He said to me, 'This is your room for a few weeks. Go there.' And I open the door and they have a Bangladesh guy. Lots of Bangladesh guys. I am Sri Lankan. I don't speak Hindi and they don't speak English or any kind of language. I'm stuck... I think, 'What I do now, what I do now, I need to call somewhere' and I just go. I walk all over the city during that week. I walked and I found Vodafone and I bought a SIM card. And after I called the company, they said to me, 'You need to wait one week.' After one week, I found some Sri Lankan guy. And I moved to their apartment. I asked them, 'I can't, brother, I'm from Sri Lanka. I can't stay there with the Bangladeshi guys. Because I can't communicate.' And they said to me, 'No problem, brother, come here.'

Live-in caregivers and those who were accommodated in houses had better living experiences. As detailed by one participant:

The good thing is at the moment the accommodation is very good for us. Only four people are staying in one accommodation. It's like a villa. A hotel villa they provide for us. It's okay for us now. One room we are sharing with two people. One big room. The others are in a single room [...]. The beds are new because it's in the hotel area. It's inside the hotel. So, they have kept the good beds and everything.

While live-in caregivers had their own private space – generally an addition to the house with a private entrance or a private room – their living conditions were complicated by complex family arrangements, for instance, family divorce. As detailed by one participant:

Before, when I came here, it was a family. But after two years of staying with them, they got divorced. And now I'm staying with the mother and the son and the baby. There are two kids. And they both have the same partner, each other. And when the kids are there, I'm going there to the father. Alternate. That is the problem now. Because when the boy is there, because they have... they have two weeks for the father, two weeks for the mother. When the kid is there, I go there. The other house.

Eight people in our sample paid for their own accommodation, anywhere from 60 to 200 euros (300–1,000 RON) per month, typically for a room or a bed in a shared flat. Two people paid around 400 euros (2,000 RON) per month for a two-room (one bedroom) flat. While these amounts are in line with what was the average rent in Bucharest at the time, around 700–800 euros per month for a two-three bedroom apartment (Roşu, 2025), in cases of overcrowded accommodations these amounts would have worked as cash injections from the workers to the landlord. For instance, some of our participants living 11 to a room were asked to pay 250 euros each per month for their accommodation. That works out to 2,750 euros monthly rent for the unit, three times the typical rent in Bucharest in 2024.

One person who lived in a hostel was charged 70 RON per day and someone living in a similar dormitory-style building paid 450 RON (100 euros) per month to stay in what they called 'the worst camp'.

Four of those living in flats mentioned that their employer paid fully for their apartment. In these instances, living conditions seem to have been better. As described by one participant:

[The accommodation] is really, really nice. I found another person to stay with him in the same apartment. They [the employer] are covering everything. Yes. So everything is okay and I have my own room. Okay, the kitchen and the bathroom are shared, but my roommate is very nice, and he is not, he does not exist, let's say. Yes. Very calm. [We have] two rooms, one kitchen. We have everything. One bathroom. We have the heating, the cooling also, air conditioning. Yes. Hot water to take a shower. Yes. Everything is okay.

Two other workers mentioned that their employer partially paid for their flat. One person lived with their spouse, who was also a migrant worker. They were renting an apartment on the private market. The flat cost them 2,000 RON (400 euros) per month, of which half was paid by their employer. The other person mentioned having their one room in an apartment shared with two other people, for which the employer was deducting 200 euros from their 800 euro monthly salary.

Fifteen participants commented on the distance from their accommodations to their places of work, and referred to different travel times as a result of changing their accommodations or places of work. Six participants took public transport (buses or trams) to work, mentioning commutes of anywhere from 10 to 90 minutes; this proved difficult during rush hour, and they sometimes had to use up to three modes of transport. Six people had their place of work within walking distance of where they were living. Out of these, one person took a 10-minute bike ride to work. One person had an hour-long drive in heavy traffic, as their place of work was 30 km from where they lived. Another participant mentioned that they had their own car, which they had bought to avoid public transportation; they had a 30-minute drive to work. One person had a working arrangement where they had to go once a week to Sinaia, a mountainous area about a two-hour drive from Bucharest. Two people had no travel time, since they were living in the same building where they worked.

Those dealing with long commutes and long working hours commented on how these factors 'ate up' their day, especially for those already living in overcrowded housing, since it delayed their return home and complicated their end-of-day tasks such as meal preparation:

One month ago, the distance from the accommodation to the working place was only about 25 minutes. It's okay. Very good. But now, the manpower agency moved us to another accommodation. It's one and a half hours travelling to our workplace. Yes. If I have a 9 am shift, I wake up... it's one and half hours from our accommodation.

I wake up one hour before and prepare some food quickly if I can [laughing]. Then I'm ready. I come to the bus spot and go to the workplace. And work from 9 [am] to 9 pm. After that, I take the bus from that place, and one and half hours travelling to the accommodation. Then I prepare some food and sleep around 10.30 [calculating], 11.30 [calculating], 12, like that. I go to sleep normally. Sometimes it's more time because if the kitchen is busy, sometimes in the night [laughing] it's going to take a more time to prepare my food. Sometimes the bathroom has a queue, then I have to wait for more time. Sometimes I sleep around 12.30, 1 am, like that.

The awareness-access paradox in health care

Romania's social protection system relies on payroll deductions and includes pension contributions (CAS), health insurance (CASS) and unemployment insurance. Emergency medical care is provided free of charge to anyone seeking assistance in the emergency departments of public hospitals, regardless of their immigration status or their medical insurance. Primary care, however, which includes access to a family doctor, specialist consultations, preventive care and routine medical examinations, requires having up-to-date health insurance.

Every migrant worker in Romania with a valid working contract is automatically insured and is legally entitled to primary health care based on the mandatory deductions from their salary, just like any Romanian citizen. This means that, on paper, migrant workers are directly granted access to the medical care system. In practice however, there are barriers to accessing this care, such as knowing how to register with a family doctor.

Twelve migrant workers interviewed in this study did not know whether they had access to medical care in Romania, since they were not informed on this matter when they signed their contract or when they took employment in the country. In the words of some of the participants:

I think I have [health insurance] in my resident permit. My employer is paying the taxes and I hope...

Insurance also, insurance also I don't know. [...] No company insurance... insurance... before I pay the insurance. I don't know [for my current company] this company, this year I don't know, will check.

Honestly, I don't know. I have a paper with [health] insurance, but it must be for a year, right? I think I have it.

One participant shared that they felt overwhelmed by the number of papers they needed to sign, so they were unsure whether any health-related documentation was included:

They give many papers for signature, but I don't know where. It's mostly in the Romanian language, I don't know. They also don't say anything, just sign, sign, sign. Everyday sign, sign, sign.

Six interviewees knew they had health insurance, and three participants also had a family doctor. For those registered with a family doctor, additional issues surfaced, in particular in relation to language barriers encountered during medical consultations. As explained by one interviewee:

My doctor, he cannot speak English. I cannot understand Romanian well. So both of us, I am stressed about how I can understand him and him also. So every time I go there, I bring some friends.

Two participants took sick days off, while six other participants assumed that in cases of emergency, they would most probably be able to take time off.

One participant described having a high degree of dependency on the health system due to a stage IV cancer diagnosis and affirmed that they had survived thanks to the Romanian health care system, which provides free access to oncological treatment. The interview with this participant was quite emotional, as they were crying for most of the conversation. They were particularly saddened that they could not see their children at home because this would mean losing access to their treatment:

But because my employer already is, they did not support me financially, but I'm still grateful because of [crying]... because of the health insurance I survived [crying]. I just want to bring my children here because I cannot go home because my medical is here. My oncologist is here. For five years, I need to survive my treatment. And so I want to go home, but I need to stay here because I still have my treatment. I just want to bring my children, but I don't know how...

Despite the Romanian health care system providing free oncological care, there are limitations, as most imaging tests are not covered. This burden was even higher for our participant, as they were unable to secure work to pay for these costs. As they shared:

I'm looking [for work] because I cannot survive like this for four months. I cannot even pay for my echography because I have been really broke for four months. I don't have work. And just for a few months' salary that I spend from my food, my medicine, I am the one who's, you know, buying for my own money. So I really want to work. [...] I don't know because I don't have any idea. Because first... I have a CT scan. The CT scan is very expensive because this is 1,700 [RON].

More than meets the eye: Discrimination, racism and xenophobia at work

Three participants in our sample described experiences of racism and xenophobia. Two of these had been subjected to racist or xenophobic attitudes or remarks from their employers. One of them provided a detailed account of a discriminatory exchange with their employer that was meant to humiliate them:

Her friend [the employer's friend] asked me if I have some friends that she could hire. And she [the employer] started listening and she's turning to the friends in front of me. And yeah, Filipinos are looking for jobs coming here because they are like Africans. They don't have to live in the villages that are like uncivilised people [crying]. And I just make it like a smile, okay? Because I have a strong personality that even in front of them, I kept smiling. Not to show them [crying].

The other person who encountered xenophobia in their workplace shared, while crying, that the treatment they received was inhumane:

For us, you know, for us, it's okay for us to work, even if it's hard work or anything. We can work. But how you treat one person like you're a dog [crying]. A dog is better [treated] than us [crying]. It's very difficult. [...] We don't care about all the things, but we also wanted you to respect us as a person. To treat us as a person.

Someone else commented that the discrepancy in their treatment at work – reflected in their lower wages and higher number of working hours compared to their Romanian counterparts, who were better treated and better paid, and worked shorter hours – constituted an example of discrimination.

Five other people in our sample explicitly stated that they did not face any nationality-based or racial difference in treatment, saying that they got treated similarly to the Romanian workers:

Of course, there is a Romanian employee, but there is one treatment, there is no difference.

Now, honestly, the way I'm treated at my current job isn't special – it's how they treat everyone. We're treated just like the Romanians. There's no difference.

Our sample was small, however, and just because only a few participants engaged with the topic of racism and discrimination does not mean that such incidents do not occur in Romanian society. After all, there have been multiple published accounts that show that racism and xenophobia are constants in the life of migrant workers in the country, and sometimes take the form of physical violence. The wave of physical violence against migrant workers started when politician Dan Tănase, from the extreme right-wing Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) urged their social media followers to refuse food orders delivered by migrant workers (Garvey & Ghiorghe, 2025). Following these remarks, a young person filmed themselves punching a food delivery worker in the face, while calling them an 'invader', before being arrested by a police officer who happened to be passing by (Amariei, 2025). On the same day, in the city of Cluj-Napoca, a delivery worker was beaten and ended up in the hospital in a coma (Popescu, 2025).

A midsummer night's dream: The Romanian act

Eight participants felt a personal affinity for Romania, stating that they like the country and feel happy there. Most of their comments indicated this was due to the links they have cultivated in the local community, to having made friends, and to feeling welcomed in Romanian society, with some also commenting that they appreciated the weather:

No, not bad, because we encounter Romanian friends and Romanian people. They are good to us. It is good. The safety is ok. The weather is ok. It is bearable. But the winter is quite cold. We don't have winter in our country. But it is ok. In general, it is ok.

But the people here in Romania... I like the people here. Romania is very nice and polite to us.

The country is nice, the people love foreigners, there is not much discrimination, the majority we can't generalise of course. Nice and comfortable country, the weather is nice, one can do anything in it.

Five participants discussed the high cost of living and their precarious occupational conditions, including low wages, which led them not to considering the country a good living option. As emphasised by some of them:

It's not very good, mainly because the salaries are often not enough. That's really the main issue – low salaries. Most foreign employees in Romania struggle with this problem. It's difficult to get by each month because the pay just isn't sufficient to cover the cost of living here.

It is becoming more expensive with time, and the salary is the same. I mean, I was transferred from job to job on the same wage.

For nine other participants, their precarious conditions at work made them fantasise about a future elsewhere, in Western Europe, across the Atlantic in Canada, or in Australia or New Zealand:

Well, I have planned to go to either Italy or the Netherlands. Italy to be honest because it is Catholic.

My dream is to work in Italy. [...] Because I have relatives there. [...] They are already citizens there and they are asking me if I want to transfer here, just tell us.

Australia, Canada, I have my relatives in Canada, and I have my relatives in Australia. They live a sweet life, and they tell me that it is better to go there. But there is no way.

Two participants with families were also considering moving to other countries specifically to get better educational opportunities to their children:

I'd like to stay, but I have a plan for my child's studies. I have to move to another country to get my child for his studies. [...] I think for the studies it's better for the UK, Australia, New Zealand. Those are the three countries that are good for higher studies. And Canada also. I just found that Canada is also good for higher education.

Discussion

Migrant workers interviewed in this study were employed in various industries including baking, care work, carpentry, cleaning, delivery, hospitality and retail logistics. Some of them came to Romania after working in similar industries in other countries, such as the Gulf states. Others came to Romania directly from their countries of origin, citing economic considerations as their primary reason for migrating. Many of them had families they were supporting at home, and they described in detail how difficult it is for them to be away from their families, especially their children.

Our study found that migrant workers in Romania face high recruitment fees, improper contracts that often deceive them about the work they are going to do, low wages, wage theft, abusive and dangerous occupational conditions, and inadequate and/or overcrowded living conditions.

Migrant workers' contracts are not simply agreements between a worker and an employer: they are facilitated by third-party stakeholders, private recruitment entities that make a profit off the workers by interposing themselves in the employer-worker relationship. Since at the time of our research this relationship was not regulated either by the government of Romania, where employment took place, or by those of the workers' countries of origin, there was no one to oversee this recruitment process and hold these private recruitment firms to account. As a result, they were able to get away with charging workers commissions as high as the equivalent of one year's worth of their salaries while offering little in return, often not even the jobs that migrants were led to expect, with the actual job being for a different employer, in a different location, or for a different salary than what was agreed on.

It is not just that the migrants' rights were trampled on at work; as well, the workers were often not even aware of their rights. This confusion started the moment they signed their employment contracts. Many workers could not even identify their employer; and their contracts specified one firm, but the actual signatory was a completely different one, leaving workers in the dark about whom they could contact if a problem arose. Moreover, very few workers mentioned receiving training at work, and some were afraid to start work, in particular in the food delivery industry, where some people witnessed co-workers die on the job from being run over in traffic.

The low wages of migrant workers were in many cases insufficient to cover their living costs, as most worked for minimum wage or only slightly above it. In Romania, the minimum wage in fact falls below the minimum consumption basket measure (*coş minim de consum*), estimated in 2024 at 3,972 RON net/6,789 RON gross (795 EUR net/1,320 EUR gross) for a single adult (FES, 2024). The consumption basket is a measure of what constitutes a decent standard of living, and refers to a collection of services and goods, which include, alongside housing and food, a range of everyday necessities such as clothing, personal care, transportation, communication, leisure activities and provisions for unforeseen expenses such as family contingencies or health emergencies (Guga et al., 2018). Since the pay of migrant workers in Romania was below the living wage set by the minimum consumption basket, they were forced to take on additional jobs or even to collect bottles on the streets for additional cash.

In terms of occupational conditions, the Romanian Labour Code seems practically not to apply to migrant workers. Workers interviewed reported much longer hours than the standard eight-hour working day, overtime work without pay, few to no days off, including no time off for statutory public holidays, and no paid vacation. This all increases employers' ability to extract value from migrant labour.

The extraction of surplus value was most evident in the case of au pair and food delivery workers. Often high-skilled professional educators in their home countries, au pair workers in Romania are forced to accept domestic work, with the hidden motive of also providing private English tutoring to the children residing in the homes they clean. At a fraction of what it would cost to hire a private English tutor on the Romanian market, the families employing these au pairs are able to provide an English language education to their children at a low cost while also having included in that cost the cooking of their meals and cleaning of their homes. The economic value extracted from these migrant workers is not only from their domestic labour, but also from their educational skills, which equip the children of Romanian families with the needed cultural capital to later on perform well in a market economy. And while au pair workers provide multiple types of value to a single employer, food delivery workers provide surplus value to multiple

stakeholders competing on the free market: it is from their labour that the fleet companies get their profit, the delivery platforms get their commission, and the landlords get their rent.

This study found that current legislation in Romania exacerbates the dependency of workers on their employers. The release letter that employers need to sign to free migrant workers to choose another job is in effect a gift to bad employers, who can simply refuse to sign the written consent form in order to keep workers captive in their situation and in no position to refuse precarious work. And in cases where migrants encounter issues with their employers, their complaints tend to fall on deaf ears with Romanian state authorities. In fact, migrant workers feel more comfortable talking with civil society representatives than with the state authorities overseeing labour issues. Although only three participants in our sample in fact requested a release letter from their employer, this does not mean that other migrant workers would not also have liked to ask for one. But because this letter is required in order to change employers, and because workers' residency in Romania is tied to the employer, migrant workers are unlikely to request such a letter in the first place.

It is not only that employers have power because workers are legally bound to them, currently for a period of six months – at the time we conducted our study this period was one year – but also because employers are responsible for submitting the paperwork necessary to secure migrant workers' residency in the country. This provides an additional degree of employer control, and can easily lead to abuse. It might, for example, lead to situations where employers indefinitely withhold workers' documents, such as their IDs and passports, on the pretext that they still need to submit the required paperwork, or fail to submit the paperwork altogether. This often results in migrant workers falling into illegality and having to return home. Moreover, when employers cancelled workers' contracts within the 90-day window, they often leave workers with no place to go. This often works as a manufactured reason not to pay them for their labour.

Another unique element in the mistreatment of migrant workers in Bucharest is how open their exploitation is, yet at the same time hidden. Consider as an example the case of 11 workers who were sharing one room in a Roman Square apartment in the city centre. Hardly anyone passing through the area, which is filled with bookstores, cafés, shops and the towering Association for Economic Studies (ASE) building, would ever imagine that in one of those apartments on Magheru Street, one of Bucharest's main traffic arteries, close to a dozen people would be housed in a single room. This circumstance tends to be different from other contexts where migrant workers are housed, which are generally 'out of sight and out of mind', in isolated small communities; consider, for example, Mexican workers in rural Canada, or Romanian migrant workers on asparagus farms in rural Germany. Some of the industries which rely heavily on migrant workers, such as hospitality, restaurants, and food delivery, make their presence felt in the core of the city, yet few people would imagine that the very same city core that prides itself on its European-style cafés and dining experiences also houses migrant workers in medieval conditions.

Workers could not comment on whether the apartments where they were housed were owned by their employer. However, this has been the case elsewhere; for instance, in Prince Edward Island, Canada, it has been documented that seafood processors were also landlords providing housing to migrant workers and charging them rents above the fair market prices for those accommodations (Bejan et al., 2023). The high prices paid by migrant workers in Bucharest for their inadequate and overcrowded housing arrangements show that workers are exploited not only through extraction by employers of the surplus value of their labour, but also through a much more direct mechanism where employer-landlords (presumably) or community landlords friendly with employers extract their money in the form of the rent charged for their living accommodations.

Since there are no regulations relating to migrant worker housing, and so no requirement for employers to provide housing, or for those that do provide it to abide by adequate occupancy standards, workers' living conditions become a matter of employer discretion. If workers stumble upon a decent employer, they tend to have their accommodation provided and are generally housed in decent flats, with each person having their own room. In other instances, however, employers minimize the cost for their flats by putting as many people as possible into one residence. But employers are employers, and their role on the private market is to sell and produce their products at a profit. Their basic motive is to maximise returns on investment; it is not their job to protect workers' housing rights. And if migrant workers are in a country, that country's government has the obligation to provide social protections to workers and to hold employers accountable, and prevent them from abusing or exploiting them, subtracting rent from pay, or

hyper-maximising the surplus value already extracted from migrant workers' labour by crowding them into substandard accommodations.

The instances of overcrowding detailed in this report, such as people living on any unused surface of a room or where 300 people had access to only one kitchen and had to wait in line for hours to use a stove, are clearly inhumane. The Romanian government needs to implement a system of checking these lodgings to ensure that such inadequate living conditions do not become a defining feature of migrant housing in the country. Ironically, migrant accommodations have recently been the subject of political polemic. At the end of 2025, the leader of Romania's far-right political party, AUR, filmed himself at the site of two Bucharest flats, one renovated and one unrenovated, implying that migrant workers lived in the renovated flat and therefore enjoyed better living conditions than Romanian citizens (Hotnews, 2025). But this was clearly an electoral ploy, since 24 people living in one room and 300 people sharing one kitchen, as detailed in this report, can hardly be called high-end living conditions.

In addition to the Romanian state stepping in to regulate occupational and living conditions for migrant workers, bilateral state-to-state accords, such as Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), also need to be signed between Romania and the countries of origin of migrant workers in Romania, so that their states can also protect them while they are on Romanian soil. For instance, the practice of workers arriving in Romania with no actual job and then having to rely on manpower agencies to find them employment, along with the vulnerability and uncertainty that come with not having a secure place of work, could be easily avoided if the needed provisions were made through such MOUs. Migrants would then come to work in Romania as recruits of their own national employment division or the Ministry of Labour in their home country, which would place them in guaranteed jobs that would also match what is stipulated in their state-to-state negotiated agreements.

This is the case, for instance, with the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) in Canada, which has existed for over 50 years and is governed by bilateral agreements between Canada and Mexico and other Latin American countries (Consulate General of Mexico in Toronto, 2016). Mexicans coming to work on Canadian farms are recruited through the Mexican National Employment Service (SNE), under the Mexico Ministry of Labour (STPS). Workers are not charged any fees, they know clearly in advance where they are going to work, and they have the backup of Mexican consular services in Canada, which they can contact if they encounter problems. While cases of worker abuse still exist under the SAWP programme (Bejan et al., 2024), these tend to be less frequent as compared with other low-wage migrant streams in Canada, since the Mexican state is able, at least on paper, to protect the rights of its nationals abroad.

Bilateral agreements not only would create a framework for better protection of workers' rights but would also eliminate the role of third-party agencies in recruitment. Consequently, they would also eliminate the issue of workers taking out loans from banks or lenders, or selling their valuables in order to be able to pay to secure a work contract in Romania. While *OUT 32/2026* aims at requiring Romanian recruitment firms to register with the government, many migrant workers would still rely on unregulated recruitment companies in their countries of origin, so this is a solution to only half of the problem of unscrupulous and expensive recruitment of workers. Except for two workers, all the people we interviewed had to pay for their recruitment, mainly to agencies in their country of origin. A third of them paid fees amounting to thousands of euros, as high as 9,000 euros (10,500 USD). An entire local recruitment industry is flourishing in source countries on the backs of these workers. Accordingly, the originating and the receiving state together need to implement joint regulatory mechanisms, such as the above-mentioned MOUs, so that profit-taking on the backs of people coming to work for minimum wage is not permitted.

Although reports of racist and xenophobic treatment of immigrants had surfaced in Romanian media, our data did not show, with a few exceptions, that it is a common occurrence. This is not to say that such incidents never occur, since our participant sample was small: 25 people out of the 100,000 who arrive yearly in Romania. It is also important to note that we interviewed only migrants in Bucharest, Romania's capital and the country's largest urban centre, where most people and employers are more likely to be tolerant of foreigners than in smaller urban centres or rural areas. Indeed, the racist incidents reported in the media mostly occurred elsewhere, such as the incident in Ditrău, a village in the central part of Romania, when residents organised themselves (on social media and in person at the city hall) to expel from their community the two migrants working at a local bakery (Cojan, 2020). Lastly, we interviewed only migrant workers connected with JRS Romania; thus, they were migrants who felt able to voice their concerns and

were perhaps less vulnerable to this form of mistreatment than migrants without any support, or others who would perhaps not even feel comfortable talking with an NGO.

The data for this study were collected in 2024. Some of the issues that appeared in our study, such as abusive recruitment practices on the Romanian side, should soon be resolved following the implementation of *OUG 32/2026*. This is indeed a strong law geared towards migrant protection, and many in the community, such as the International Organization of Migration (IOM) have hailed this legislation as a step in the right direction in terms of holding employers and recruitment agencies accountable and giving increased rights to migrant workers (IOM, 2026). Its weaknesses, however, lie first in the fact that it provides only general guidelines, whereas the actual conditions that workers face depend on the specific industry in which they are working; second, that it does not address the multifaceted elements of certain issues such as workers' living conditions in Romania; and third, that it does not include provisions for clear enforcement mechanisms.

For instance, under *OUG 32/2026*, while employers and recruitment agencies are not allowed to ask workers for commissions and fees, food delivery workers are often charged rent for their scooters, which constitutes a fee charged after the worker has been placed with an employer or manpower agency in the country. In relation to accommodation, while *OUG 32/2026* caps the rent that workers can be required to pay for their accommodation at 25% of their salary, our study found that high prices were not the main problem with workers' housing. The larger issue was rather inadequate living conditions stemming from severe overcrowding. Thus, rules regarding workers' accommodations need also to stipulate occupancy guidelines to ensure that accommodations are adequate: cases of 300 people sharing a kitchen and a bathroom, people sleeping on floors or in hallways, or storing their personal belongings in garbage bags are not examples of adequate living conditions, regardless of the share of their income that workers are paying for rent.

Lastly, despite provisions under the new Ordinance that extend to migrant workers the right to collective organising and the right to join a union, the fact that their immigration status in the country is tied to their employer makes this stipulation impossible to implement in practice. Who would want to organise collectively if this might result in being dismissed from their job, jeopardising their legal status in the country? Failing to eliminate their employer-conditional permit and instead reducing this conditionality from one year to six months, as *OUG 32/2026* did, perpetuates workers' dependency on their employer for their immigration status, a practice considered by the ILO to be a form of forced labour (ILO, 2023). In general, it is the employers alone who have power over the migration trajectory of migrant workers.

Recommendations

In light of the findings outlined in this report, and considering that the legislative framework enabling labour migration to Romania continues to give advantages to employers, this study recommends that the following legislative changes be implemented by the **Romanian state**:

1. **Sign bilateral state-to-state agreements with the primary source countries of its migrant workers, specifically Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, so that migrants are recruited by their own states.** Establishing bilateral agreements, so that workers are recruited directly by their national government or Ministry of Labour would eliminate unscrupulous recruitment practices. While *OUG 32/2026* regulates Romanian recruitment agencies, this legislation of course cannot be applied in migrants' countries of origin. Having bilateral agreements in place would enable sending states to establish ethical recruitment practices and provide protective services for their citizens through their embassies and consulates in Romania, adding an essential layer of protection for workers.
2. **Amend *OUG 32/2026*, Article 40, to eliminate the six-month time restriction during which a foreign worker cannot change their employer.** As participants in a supposedly free labour market, migrant workers need to be free to change their employer if unsatisfied with their working conditions: the Romanian state does not have an obligation to employers or to recruitment agencies to guarantee them access to a captive workforce at all costs. If employers treat their migrant workers well, workers will continue to work for them. Hence, the existing six-month provision merely helps 'bad' employers, who benefit from guarantees that workers will not leave regardless of the treatment they receive from their employer.
3. **Amend *Law 114/1996* on housing standards to include standard occupancy guidelines** for migrant workers' accommodation, such as stipulations on the maximum occupancy per room and sanitary facility-to-person ratios. Currently, migrant workers frequently experience severe overcrowding and inadequate housing stock. Legal provisions need to be introduced so that their accommodations must allow for a decent standard of living.
4. **Add the Ministry of Health as a joint data controller for the [WorkinRomania.gov.ro](https://www.workinromania.gov.ro) platform.** This would enable it to authorise its local and **regional DSPs to conduct inspections of migrant workers' accommodations**, ensuring that living standards are adequate and that accommodations adhere to hygiene regulations.
5. **Raise the minimum wage in the country to the living wage indicated by the minimum consumption basket measure.** Raising the minimum wage to match the minimum consumption basket would benefit all workers in the country, including migrant workers.
6. **Amend *OG 25/2014* to simplify the process by which workers obtain their residency cards and work permits.** Employers should be required to submit all documentation to IGI in advance of the workers' arrival in the country, with residency cards issued at the border when migrant workers enter Romania. This will eliminate problems arising for migrant workers as a result of tardy submissions by employers, such as deportation decisions and the practice of not paying workers.
7. **Amend *OUG 32/2026* so that employers are required to provide migrant workers an information sheet** outlining their labour rights, their access to health care (including emergency services, routine health examinations and access to family medicine) and an explanation of salary deductions and the difference between net and gross pay. This would address the problem of most migrants not being aware of their rights or of the fact that they have access to medical care in Romania, or of what is being deducted from their salaries and how much pay they should receive after all required contributions and taxes are deducted.

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