

SOCIALINĖS ANTROPOLOGIJOS IR ETNOLOGIJOS STUDIJOS

LIETUVOS

20(29)

2020

ETNOLOGIJA

LITHUANIAN ETHNOLOGY

STUDIES IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY

LIETUVOS ISTORIJOS INSTITUTAS
LITHUANIAN INSTITUTE OF HISTORY

VILNIUS 2020

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El. paštas / E-mail: etnolog@istorija.lt

Kražių g. 5, LT-01108 Vilnius

www.istorija.lt

Žurnalas registruotas / The Journal indexed in:

European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH)

EBSCO Publishing: Academic Search Complete, Academic Search Ultimate, Energy and Power Source, SocINDEX with Full Text, Sociology Source Ultimate

Modern Language Association (MLA) International Bibliography

Leidybą finansavo Lietuvos mokslo taryba pagal Valstybinę lituanistinių tyrimų ir sklaidos 2016–2024 metų programą (Sutartis Nr. S-LIP-19-58)

Konferencijos pranešimas

‘Coming from Abroad’: Exploring Romanian Migrants’ Transnational Social Networks through the Prism of Temporary Return

Ana-Maria Cîrstea

Return features heavily in the narratives and lives of Romanian immigrants in London, as a key topic of debate rather than a mere end goal of their migration. By analysing their experiences of temporary return, this paper¹ reveals the tensions and contradictions embedded in migrants’ transnational social networks. It applies a two-fold focus: first examining the importance of return for Romanians in London; then considering how experiences of temporary return shape migrants’ social networks. The paper is based on data from my scoping doctoral fieldwork, five weeks of participant observation and interviews with Romanians in northwest London.

Key words: *migration, Romania, transnationalism, return, social networks.*

Sugrįžimas kaip pagrindinė rumunų imigrantų Londone diskusijų tema, o ne galutinis migracijos tikslas, vyrauja šių žmonių pasakojimuose ir gyvenimuose. Šis pranešimas, kuriame analizuojama jų laikino sugrįžimo patirtis, parodo, kokia įtampa ir prieštaravimai kyla migrantų transnacionaliniuose socialiniuose tinkluose. Pranešime atkreipiamas dėmesys į du dalykus: pirmiausia nagrinėjama sugrįžimo reikšmė Londono rumunams, po to svarstoma, kaip laikino sugrįžimo patirtis formuoja migrantų socialinius tinklus. Straipsnyje panaudoti daktaro disertacijos lauko tyrimo metu surinkti duomenys: penkių savaičių trukmės Šiaurės vakarų Londone gyvenančių rumunų stebėjimas ir interviu su jais.

Raktažodžiai: *migracija, Rumunija, transnacionalizmas, sugrįžimas, socialiniai tinklai.*

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¹This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through a ‘1+3’ studentship administrated by the North East and Northern Ireland Doctoral Training Partnership. An earlier version of this paper was presented during Panel 74 (‘Migration and Transnational Social

Introduction

Return often figures as a key theme in the policy and public discourse around migration, imagined as the natural end of the migratory cycle marked by re-settling 'back home' (Gmelch 1980). Echoing and contesting these norms, return has always been an important aspect of transnational research. The recent rise in anti-migration narratives in host countries, along with the sustained economic growth in migrant-sending countries, has pushed migration researchers to look at return more closely. Most significantly, these recent changes, and the rise of cross-border connections, have strengthened researchers' theorisations of return as more than a one-off move 'back home' (Markowitz, Stefansson 2004; Carling, Erdal 2014; Hornstein, Pichler, Scholl-Schneider 2018). Instead, return constitutes a nuanced process shaped by, and in turn shaping, transnational relations and practices. A notable contribution in this respect is the concept of 'transnational return', introduced in a recent volume by Anghel *et al.* (Anghel, Fauser, Boccagni 2019). The concept proposes a 'two-way relationship between return and transnationality' (Fauser, Anghel 2019: 10), to show how transnational relations and practices shape migrants' return, *and* how return itself gives rise to new transnational relations and practices. In this paper, I focus on the first side of 'transnational return'. I explore how migrants' reflections on temporary return to Romania shape their perceptions about belonging and home, and ultimately influence their trajectories.

In other words, I am interested in how Romanians' transnational social networks influence their understanding of belonging and their trajectories, by looking at their temporary return. This focus on social networks is derived from my brief ethnographic experience with Romanian immigrants in London. My research focused on recent² migration from Romania, especially after 2014 when the UK lifted labour market restrictions for Romanians and Bulgarians. During the spring of 2019, I conducted five weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in northwest London, specifically the boroughs of Brent, Harrow and Barnet. Over the space of a month, I participated in various events in the Romanian community, from art vernissages at the Romanian Cultural Institute to picnics in unkempt parks on the outskirts of London. I complemented these opportunities for participant observation with 20 interviews, mainly with Romanian labour migrants, but also with business owners, charity workers and attachés at

Networks in Europe and the Americas') at the 2020 Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, and during a PhD student seminar at Durham University.

²Naturally, I also met and interviewed a few Romanian immigrants who had been residing in the UK for a longer period of time. While these research interactions were insightful, they are the exception rather than the norm for my scoping fieldwork.

the Romanian Embassy. During the interviews, my interlocutors went to great lengths to explain how they sustain and create transnational social networks. For my interlocutors coming from rural Romanian villages, these networks primarily mapped upon kin ties, from extended family to 'fictive' kinship such as godparents and godchildren. Depending on my interlocutors' situations, these transnational social networks expanded to also include friends and neighbours, and in some cases business partners or local officials. The main methods of tending to these social networks included frequent communication with those 'back home' via telephone or digital apps, regular updates on social media, practices like remittances, whether economic or social, and short periods of return during the summer and for religious holidays. This latest practice forms the ethnographic substance of this paper presentation.

Conceptualising return

Before delving into the ethnography, I must make an epistemological mention. In this paper presentation, I propose studying return as a category of practice, rather than just as a category of analysis. Borrowing from Brubaker (Brubaker 2013), I argue that we ought to think not only about what categories we should use, but about how to use them. In other words, I encourage thinking about return not simply as the object of analysis by asking whether Romanians return home or not. Instead, return becomes a tool of analysis, when we enquire what Romanians' understanding and experiences of return tell us about their lives as migrants and their experiences of transnational belonging.

This epistemological mention is also derived from my initial difficulty with conceptualising return. Based on existing literature on recent Romanian migration, I expected return to constitute a central topic in my interlocutors' trajectories and imagined futures. In previous studies of Romanian migration, especially to countries like Italy or Spain, return was a key feature of migrants' planned trajectories and their imaginaries of belonging (Sandu 2005; Anghel 2008; Anghel 2013; Vlase 2012; Macri 2015; Marcu 2015; Martínez 2015). My experiences as a Romanian migrant also echoed these assumptions about the role of return. During my own summer return, one of the first questions I am asked by both friends and strangers is 'Are you planning to return to Romania?' These personal experiences³ often served as a useful springboard for conversations with

³The brief mention of my experiences as a Romanian migrant should by no means be read as an outright equation between my migration and those of my participants. As a young woman coming to study at a UK university after finishing high school in Romania, my life in the UK differs starkly from my interlocutors' days spent juggling hard work, family and countless other responsibilities. However, once I started building a rapport with my interlocutors, sharing a language and

my research participants. Many of my interlocutors were interested in my plans for the future, and made suggestions about my own migrant trajectory. They stressed that I must return to Romania, and speculated at great length about how the country needs those who studied and had professional careers 'abroad' to return and create long-lasting change. When analysing my findings, I found it useful to unpack these remarks and used them to interrogate the omnipresence of return in my daily conversations in the field.

Despite the ubiquity of return in my conversations, I soon discovered that not everyone I spoke to actually planned to return to Romania. Some migrants disregarded return, due to their children being in school in the UK, and even secured British citizenship to safeguard their family's future abroad. Others had established successful businesses in London, and saw return as unfeasible. Return also appeared undesirable to young male migrants, usually single, who understood it as a personal failure. At first, this variety of responses led me to a crossroads. On the surface, return did not appear to yield a coherent response from my interlocutors. However, while not all of them planned to return to Romania, most of my participants expanded on the possibility and in fact the necessity of return during our conversations. And they did so by describing an overarching, embodied ache, or an irresistible attraction to go 'home'; this is called *dor* in Romanian.

Dor is a prominent concept in Romanian mythology and literature, as well as the everyday vernacular around place, memory and personhood. The term is etymologically linked with pain, stemming from the Latin word *dolus*. A recent metaphor I stumbled across that explains the entanglement between love and pain within *dor* is that of kneading bread, of moving the dough about, without giving it any time to rest (Rotiroti 2018). Alongside these etymological nuances, *dor* is imagined as closely linked to the Romanian national identity and geographical space. In 1936, the interwar Romanian philosopher and poet Lucian Blaga theorised *dor* as a collective Romanian state of being, closely connected to the geographical landscape of hills and valleys (Blaga 1994[1936]). In the same es-

an understanding of life in Romania represented an advantage. It became easy to joke, complain, and offer personal insights about Romanian news or events. These considerations amount to what Herzfeld describes as cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2016[1997]). He defines it as sharing facets of cultural identity 'that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (Herzfeld 2016[1997]: 7). Through anecdotes or ironic comments, individuals sharing cultural intimacy construct and challenge the nation-state as part of everyday life through common experience, transgression or intimacy. For my interlocutors, cultural intimacy ranged from considering all politicians corrupt and self-serving to priding themselves on their Romanian ingenuity. Still, much like Herzfeld posits, securing '*social intimacy* in the fullest sense' (Herzfeld 2016[1997]: 8, emphasis in original) is not a simple consequence of sharing cultural intimacy, but needs to be earned through building a rapport and trust. For my preliminary fieldwork, being Romanian facilitated this process in an already time-pressed research project.

say, Blaga writes that *dor* is therefore untranslatable. While Blaga's claims remain questionable,⁴ the concept of *dor* as untranslatable and closely linked to national identity pervades the everyday vernacular around belonging. In fact, the claim that *dor* is fundamentally untranslatable has become something of an urban legend, making the substance of numerous Facebook posts on my interlocutors' social media pages.

Aside from the colourful Facebook posts about *dor*, the ubiquitous ache to return to Romania was evident from my first day of fieldwork. In late March 2019, I started my research by exploring a neighbourhood of London pejoratively labelled 'Little Romania' by tabloid newspapers. Walking in the local park, I met Mihaela and Cristi, a young family taking their toddler to the playground. We started talking about life abroad, and Cristi was eager to give me advice: 'Your *dor* will go after one or two years. Mihaela used to miss Romania so much during her first year here. She couldn't stop crying,' making a comic imitation of eyes bulging with tears. Reflecting on this during our follow-up interview, Mihaela explained that although she got accustomed to life in London, there are feelings of *dor* that never go away, as she described them 'this melancholy, this ache for home'.

Even for those who disregard permanent return, *dor* was recognised as common and difficult to control. For Marcel, who owns many of the Romanian businesses in London, *dor* remained present even after four decades of living abroad. As my only interlocutor who fled the country before the fall of communism in 1989, Marcel was certain he would not return to live in Romania. However, he explained:

You can adapt here as a Romanian. But your heart desires it. Mine cries for it too, to go home and ... I've even been to Monaco, we used to summer there. Beautiful, but it's still not Romania, not as beautiful as Romania.

The indisputable *dor* is therefore present even for those who discount permanent return to Romania. I attribute this ubiquity of *dor* to the embodied nature of return in migrants' lives. This became evident during my conversations

⁴In fact, I identified two concepts similar to *dor* in existing ethnographic work, probably two of many similar terms. Like *dor*, the Welsh *hiraeth* is also considered to be so close to the Welsh character and experience that has become untranslatable (Trosset, Caulkins 2002). It refers to the kind of yearning for a home to which you cannot return, or which no longer exists, or maybe never was. *Hiraeth* can also refer to the beauty of the landscape of the Welsh countryside. Another similar concept to *dor* is the term *nostalghia*, pervasive in the Greek language, popular music and poetry. *Nostalghia* in Greek differs from its English understanding of romantic sentimentality. Instead, it translates as a 'desire or longing with burning pain to journey' (Seremetakis 1994: no pg). Etymologically, it is composed of the noun *nosto*, meaning return to the homeland, and the noun *alghos*, characterising one's pain in soul and body (Seremetakis 1994). Alongside these ethnographic examples, one ought to contextualise Blaga's theorisation, given the strong nationalist ethos present in the country and in Europe at his time of writing.

with Marian, a delivery driver in his mid-30s, who candidly told me: 'I came here thinking what will be, will be. But *pământu'* is still in Romania.' The term *pământu'* means soil in its dictionary form, but Marian's use of it refers to much more than that. By means of a botanical analogy, Marian emphasised that his foundation, the very soil which nurtured him, is back in Romania. Much like the feeling which Mihaela or Marcel could not elude even after many years in London, Marian's *pământu'* not only points to the necessity of return, but also emphasises its embodied dimension, being seen as part of himself.

Marian's narrative linking *dor* and Romanian soil serves as a useful analytical hinge. The imagery of roots and soil is ubiquitous in everyday language around Romanian national identity and belonging. These vernacular associations highlight the deep metaphysical connection between space and national identity. This connection is what Malkki labels the 'powerful sedentarism in our thinking' (Malkki 1992: 31), the assumption that human beings lead sedentary lives reliant on deep connections between national identity and geographical areas. In Malkki's theorisation, sedentarism is not only deeply metaphysical, but also has deeply moral characteristics. When imagining migrants, the loss of physical connection to the 'homeland' is connected to one's loss of moral values. As a result, violating sedentarist assumptions are not located within the wider socio-political context, but act as an 'inner, pathological condition of the displaced' (Malkki 1992: 33). Return is cast in a positive light, an ultimate goal to fix the failure to comply with the tenet that human beings are fundamentally sedentary.

While this line of argument is useful to think through the contested belonging of Romanians in the UK, I will not go into detail about that in this paper. Instead, what I found interesting is how this sedentarism is illustrated in migrants' interactions with their transnational social networks when visiting Romania. Within a sedentarist framework, returning to Romania would mend the disorder associated with migrants' uprootedness manifested as the embodied feelings of *dor*. In this instance, rather than just a personal psychological experience, *dor* also becomes a form of cultural politics (Ahmed 2004). Sara Ahmed theorises emotions as a means of understanding how subjects become invested in particular social structures, as relational processes rather than mere individual psychological states (Ahmed 2004). She writes:

... emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others [...] In other words, emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects (Ahmed 2004: 10).

As such, *dor* as a form of cultural politics reveals the norms of belonging in which Romanians become invested in the process of migration. My interlocutors consider return for the summer and for religious holidays as necessary to sustain social networks, but also to tend to feelings of *dor*. Rather than only a personal sentiment, *dor* highlights the role played by return in migrants' imaginations about belonging as linked to the geographical space of the nation-state. Expressing and acting upon *dor* reproduces the wider sedentarist framework underpinning Romanians' understanding of mobility. In turn, these sedentarist norms are echoed in how Romanian migrants interact with their transnational social networks during temporary return.

'Coming from abroad'

The importance of the sedentarist framework and its role in shaping transnational social networks came to light during an event I attended at the Romanian Cultural Institute. The event encouraged Romanians living in London to return to an area in northern Romania where migration was creating a succession of demographic problems, including an ageing population, lack of workers, and poor revenues. Hosted in an imposing building in Belgrave Square, the event welcomed several suit-clad politicians all the way from Romania to speak about the many accomplishments that await those willing to return home. Towards the end of his lengthy speech, one of these politicians described migration as 'a competition in the labour market' where 'all the best [people] from Eastern Europe are extracted to the West'. By way of an example, he went on to state that most of his university friends now live and work abroad. 'It's easier to leave than to stay at home. But I like challenges, so I chose to stay,' he explained with a pleased grin.

Utterly oblivious to the insult in this remark to a room full of migrants, the politician's comment highlights the morality of return present in many of my interlocutors' interactions with their transnational social networks. Moving and working abroad is perceived as shameful, as 'the easy way out'. As such, the act of migration leaves a stain on the moral fabric of the individual migrant. In turn, the lack of economic and social prospects in Romania are erased as potential causes of migration, and politicians like the one quoted above are absolved from blame.

These moral claims about migration become more evident in the narratives my interlocutors encountered when visiting Romania for the summer or for religious holidays. During these temporary homecomings, the possibilities and realities of return clash in my interlocutors' reflections. While temporary return is imagined as easing *dor* and maintaining social relationships, my participants describe a nagging feeling of discontent when they are perceived as 'coming from abroad' (*venit din străinătate*). Specifically, family and friends in Romania

often perceive them as wealthy and arrogant, as a consequence of living and working in the UK. 'Coming from abroad' turns into a veritable archetype of the *nouveau-riche* migrant, the product of rapid material accumulation as a consequence of toiling away in menial jobs abroad. Echoing the politician's comments above, this alleged avenue to material accumulation is considered as 'the easy way out'. As such, my interlocutors express how their labour is routinely devalued in social interactions with family and friends during their temporary return.

On holiday in Romania for their summer holidays, Mihaela and Cristi explain that their friends and family treat them as if they have a lot of money: 'They say: "These people are coming from abroad, they have a lot of money," but they don't understand the hard work and sacrifices that go into saving money.' These sacrifices include sharing an overcrowded house with other Romanians, or Cristi working night shifts to earn extra money. People living in their native village also ask Mihaela to help them migrate by finding them 'a job in London, maybe at a hospital or a police station'. When explaining that she cannot help, Mihaela is met with antagonist responses, accusing her and her husband that 'we forgot where we came from'. For Mihai, a young 20-something man who works in construction, 'coming from abroad' is similarly related to his personal fault or deviance: 'People tell me: "You forgot where you came from now that you've been to the UK."'

To make sense of these narratives, I use Carling's notion of asymmetries (Carling 2008). Building on fieldwork with Cape Verdean immigrants in the Netherlands, he proposes that relations between migrants and non-migrants in the sending country are best characterised by multi-faceted asymmetries which determine the moralities of transnationalism. Asymmetries pose a source of frustration and conflict, in turn theorising transnational social networks as multi-faceted rather than simply relying on the equation of migrants as better off than those 'left behind'.

Within these asymmetries, transnational practices are meant to repay what Ghassan Hage calls the 'gift of communality' (Hage 2002: 201). Throughout the life course, individuals partake in a wider 'general moral economy of social belonging' (Hage 2002: 203), whereby one contributes to their community, the family, nation or village, through life-long participation. Migration renders this impossible, paying the gift of communality happens within short bursts and induces a sense of guilt. As a result, migrants who fail to repay the gift of communality are perceived as 'forgetting where they came from' by their kin and friends. For Carling's interlocutors, the transnational practices which can repay this 'gift of communality' are remitting to close kin and facilitating migration for others (Carling 2008). For migrants, these expectations are a source of discontent

since non-migrants perceive them as having unlimited access to money, asking for products from abroad, or expecting them to cover expenses when on holiday. In turn, the inability to meet these expectations creates moral frameworks in which migrants who fail to be 'grateful' to their home community or kin are labelled as 'forgetting where they came from' (Carling 2008: 1460).

For my interlocutors, paying the 'gift of communality' also translates into material offerings and gifts, as well as an expectation to facilitate migration for others. As in Mihaela's case when acquaintances asked her to find them a job, these expectations trouble my interlocutors, because they are perceived as personal shortcomings. When they are unable to meet the expectations of their kin and friends, my interlocutors are perceived as 'forgetting where they came from'. In line with Malkki's insights about the sedentarist understanding of mobility, migrants' uprootedness is associated with this unique type of personal moral shortcoming, manifested as a result of 'coming from abroad'.

For some of my interlocutors, these experiences of being perceived as arrogant and wealthy due to 'coming from abroad' constitute a clear obstacle in them realising their planned return. For Marian, it leads to a bitter-sweet situation of 'not feeling at home' in the house he worked so hard to build: 'Two weeks a year, I go back and spend time in *my* garden and feel like a stranger.' Yet he does not feel 'at home' in the UK either: 'When I'm here, I want to go back to Romania. And when I'm in Romania, I want to come back here.' This conflicting experience is also common for Mihaela: 'After two or three weeks in Romania, I cannot wait to get back to London.' Alongside other experiences during their visits to Romania (e.g. interactions with bureaucracy and state institutions), being perceived as 'coming from abroad' by family and friends heavily influences my interlocutors' understanding of belonging. For those imagining a permanent return to Romania, these experiences pose significant questions, and even result in delaying return.

Preliminary conclusions

This experience of being 'neither here nor there' emphasises how feelings of *dor* and their culmination through temporary return lead to a moment of realisation for migrants. Their regular return to Romania for a short holiday highlights a sense of discontent for migrants when they are perceived by close friends and family as 'coming from abroad'. By reflecting on their experiences of temporary return, my interlocutors emphasise changes in their understanding of belonging and 'home'. The differences between the possibilities and the realities of return also show how Romanians' transnational social networks are loaded with tensions and contradictions. More broadly, they show how both mobility and

attachment are not uni-linear. Instead, they are shaped by, and in turn shape, social relations and ideas in both London and migrants' native villages or towns back in Romania. Specifically, my interlocutors' experiences of discontent highlight how transnational social networks can cause a sense of rupture and discontinuity, alongside belonging or reciprocity. Building on their experiences of discontent, many of my interlocutors find themselves postponing return. As a churchgoer I met in north London candidly explained: 'I said I'd stay for two months, and now it's twelve years later.'

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„Atvykstant iš užsienio“: Rumunijos migrantų transnacionaliniai socialiniai tinklai iš laikino sugrįžimo perspektyvos

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Santrauka

Reaguodami į aižėjančią ekonomiką ir socialines perspektyvas, rumunai yra viena sparčiausiai augančių ir labiausiai aptariamų migrantų grupių šių dienų Europoje. Tyrimo objektu pasirinkusi šį naujausią reiškinį, savo etnografiniame tyrime analizuoju rumunų migrantų Londone trajektorijas ir motyvus. Šiame pranešime nagrinėjama migrantų laikino sugrįžimo patirtis, atskleidžiama transnacionaliniuose socialiniuose tinkluose matoma įtampa ir prieštaravimai. Jame panaudoti doktorantūros lauko tyrimo metu surinkti duomenys – penkių savaitių rumunų migrantų Šiaurės vakarų Londone stebėjimas ir interviu su jais.

Rumunijos valstybė, veikdama per Jungtinės Karalystės institucijas ir „namuose“ vykdomą politiką, migraciją laiko gėdingu veiksmu. Tokia nuostata atspindi mūsų mąstymo apie mobilumą sedentarizmą susiejant nacionalinių valstybių priklausymą geografinėi teritorijai (Malkki 1992). Toks sedentarizmas pastebimas ir migrantų pasakojimuose apie sugrįžimą. Nesvarbu – visam laikui ar tik trumpam, dauguma mano pašnekovų nori grįžti į Rumuniją, tokį savo norą išreiškdami žodžiu „dor“. Šis žodis, kuris reiškia skausmą ar ilgesį, figūruoja visuose migrantų pasakojimuose ir įsivaizdavime apie sugrįžimą į Rumuniją.

Tačiau įsivaizduojamas migrantų sugrįžimas visiškai prieštarauja jų apsilankymo Rumunijoje vasaros atostogų ar religinių švenčių metu patirčiai. Suvokiama kaip „atvykę iš užsienio“ (rum. *venit din străinătate*), migrantai susiduria su vietinių abejonėmis jų morale ir patriotizmu. Jų darbas užsienyje taip pat nuvertinamas bendraujant su giminaičiais ir draugais, kurie dažnai prašo dovanų ar finansinės pagalbos. Pasitelkusi Jørgeno Carlingo moralinės asimetrijos sampratą (Carling 2008) tyrinėju savo pašnekovų, kai jie suvokiami kaip „atvykę iš užsienio“, patirtį. Mano nuomone, šių moralinių asimetrijų taikymas leidžia geriau suprasti transnacionalinius migrantų socialinius tinklus. Be to, laikino sugrįžimo patirtis gali padėti mums geriau suprasti transnacionalinių socialinių tinklų aktyvų vaidmenį formuojant migrantų trajektorijas ir jų sugrįžimo visam laikui planus.

Pranešime, pasitelkus laikino sugrįžimo aspektą, atskleidžiama, kaip rumunų darbo migrantai Londone palaiko transnacionalinį socialinį ryšį ir šiame procese slypinčią įtampą ir prieštaravimus.