8. Perception on poverty and inequality concerning social housing

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Abstract

This paper gives an account on the main feature of social housing within Romania and analyzes how the local authorities react to an emergency housing situation. After being evicted from a social building that has been the subject of retrocession, 25 Roma families spent five months in improvised shacks on the street as a form of protest. Local authorities only react at the pressure of civic society and tried to deal with this situation with over bureaucracy. Within this article I debate on the possibility of having in Romania an endemic discriminatory attitude towards the people who are at risk of being homeless.

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Introduction

On the 15th of September 2014, in Bucharest, 20 families were evicted from their homes located in the centrally located *Vulturilor 50* street, on the very first day of school in Romania. Appreciatively 100 people were forced out of the buildings by local police forces and riot police, with no permission or time to take all their belongings. Along with the evicted people, representatives of the NGOs tried to advocate for their rights concerning eviction. Within hours, people were out on the street. The months that followed the eviction were marked by a combination humiliation and shanty living: as of six months later, they still live in improvised shelters, on the sidewalks of the buildings where they once lived. This happened despite formal and informal efforts to reach and sensitize the municipal housing providers, which are responsible for solving their problem. These efforts materialized in protests organized both in front of public institutions and in the streets, with written pleas to the Prime Minister and the Mayors and diplomatic inquiries by several foreign embassies.

In this article, I describe the linkage between housing re-privatization (restitution) and lack of social housing policies and displacement in Bucharest, Romania. I argue, following Hackworth and Abigail (2006) that the municipal housing providers and their revanchist attitude play a key role on how the neoliberalization of housing policy unfolds. I found evidence that reinforces GerDuijzings' (2010, p. 109) point that "some of the features of neo-liberalism have taken their purest form in Eastern Europe".

There seems to be a general consensus that social housing has experienced significant transformations over the last three decades, mainly through privatization the home ownership (Priemus and Dieleman, 2002, p. 191; Ronald, 2012; Hills, 2007, p. 5). Despite the high level of rentals and social housing remaining high in some European countries (Denmark, United Kingdom, Austria and of course Holland), the promotion of home ownership made leading scholars affirm that "everywhere, the (social) rented sector is on defense" (Priemus and Dieleman, 2002, p. 191; see also Priemus, 1995).

The disregard for social housing has reached aparticularly acute level in post-socialist countries which have mass privatized, resulting in outstanding levels of home ownership. The existing housing stock was massively privatized in the early 1990s, either through purchase by the sitting tenants, or re-privatized through the restitution of housing confiscated by the socialist state (Pickvance, 1994, 2002). Moreover, after the early 1990s, the housing stock contains no more than 4% of the total housing units constructed as social housing. Out of the entire housing stock, 98.2% are

privately owned in Romania (Bejan et al., 2014, p. 8), compared to 60 to 80 per cent for the other post-socialist countries.

In order to document these issues I used a mixed method approach. The data on housing, standards of living and poverty are based on secondary analysis of statistical data. For understanding the local political dynamics and the street level dynamics of eviction, I used mainly interviews, observation of meetings with local administration officials and participatory observation. After people were evicted in September 2015, until January 2015 I spent significant periods of time with the people evicted. Aside from spending time on the streets and sidewalk where they stayed after housing eviction, I also participated in groups, meetings and protests aimed at advocating their cause. The meetings with different local administrative representatives proved to be an invaluable source of information about how social workers, municipal housing providers and their political supervisors actively and aggressively avoid, push and supervise the social dumping and the removal of poor and vulnerable tenants from central areas.

I have also been involved in an editorial project and helped the people evicted write a blog on their daily problems on the street and I have also spent time with them during their protest on the street. Aside from participant observation, interviews, participation in administrative meetings, I have also studied local budgets and administrative documents in order to identify the financial allocations of local authorities for social housing between 2003 and 2014. Despite the legal obligation to provide data on their budgets, obtaining and interpreting budget figures, the poor transparency of municipal authorities have prevented me from giving a full account on these matters. The paper continues with an overview of housing policy in Romania focused on the absence of a safety net for housing. In this section I also describe how the devolution of social housing policy from the central government to the local administration, meant, that local administration (including Bucharest) had the right to ignore the critical needs for housing of the poor households. In the second section, I describe the dynamics of that episode of eviction as a window on the joint effects of faulty housing policies and the revanchist (Smith, 1986) attitude of the local administration on the poor.

8.1. The Elephant in the Room: Housing costs and social dumping in Bucharest

The right to a proper living is an international acknowledged need. In Romania, one has one of the biggest rates of poverty in Europe. As a rule, public authorities have a *laissez faire* attitude towards vulnerable groups

in terms of housing (Dan and Dan, 2003, p. 5). Hegedus and Struyk (Hedegus and Struyk, 2005, p. 17) note that the management of the housing stock has been left to the whims of the unregulated market and that legislation has an *ad hoc* character. This was taken to extreme in Romania. According to official statistics, the price of housing became simply beyond the reach of poorer families: as Dan and Dan (2003, p. 5) describe, if a two-room flat was worth about 40 average wages in 1989, 14 years down the road, in 2003, its price became about 120 average wages.

Eurostat statistics indicate that tenants in Romania experience some of the highest housing overburden costs in the entire European Union (Rybkowska and Schneider, 2011, p. 7; see also Table 8.1). In the unregulated market, it is the highest in Europe. No less than 56.5% of all tenants experience the burden of paying rent and utilities (Rybkowska and Schneider, 2011, p. 7). Despite that, Bucharest local authorities tend to solve case by case the locative problems. Currently, social housing, rent regulation and tenant protection are simply outside the public agenda. Instead, infrastructure investments, car related infrastructure and mega-projects loom on the imagination of political campaigns and municipal public investment departments.

Country	Gross monthly income (€)	Unemployment rate (%)	Threat of poverty (%)	Extreme poverty rate (%) *
Czech Republic	990	26.7	15.3	0.0
Hungary	760	10.9	29.9	0.4
Poland	830	9.7	27.8	0.2
Slovak Republic	850	13.6	20.6	0.1
Slovenia	1530	8.2	19.3	0.0
Albania	290	14.0	–	4.3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	410	27.6	28.1	0.2
Bulgaria	330	11.3	41.6	0.4
Croatia	1050	13.5	31.3	0.1
Macedonia	330	31.0		5.9
Serbia	510	23.0	23.4	0.7
ROMANIA	470	7.4	40.3	1.7

Table 8.1. Living conditions in selected European Union countries.
Source: Eurostat (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/
population-and-housing-census/statistics-illustrated).

Housing poverty is worsened not only by social dumping, but also by its invisibility in the administrative practices and on the public agenda. Statistical invisibility and conflicts between different levels of governance are other problems. A sound analysis on the scope of needs for social housing is a rather difficult task. In most of the cases, the phenomenon of poverty is invisible, as some of the vulnerable groups are either without documents or without lease. Tsenkova nicely expresses that "the mix is complicated to evaluate since there is no systematic assessment of different governments (central or local) in the housing sector in terms of their efficiency (costs), targeting and effectiveness (outreach)" (Tsenkova, 2009, p. 91).

Conflicts of governance have also prevented the placement of social housing on the political agenda. The housing issue was transferred from the central authorities to the local authorities. Even though there are legislative paths and resources offered by central authorities to get the local administration involved into housing programs for the poor, the central and local governments have only allocated funds to programs for the middle-income people. The national housing programs do not include emergency social housing. Instead, they focus on financially solvent middle class tenants, either for renting or mortgage (Pittini and Laino, 2011, p. 25). Regulations by which public authorities can impose a minimum threshold of social housing in all the new real estate projects are unknown in Bucharest or Romania. Such cases have been implemented a long time ago in countries such as United States, England and France (Pittini and Laino, 2011, p. 29), as a means to avoid social exclusion and segregation of the poor.

Another problem that significantly shrunk the function and scope of social housing has been the problem of housing restitution of the nationalized houses (Chelcea, 2006, 2012; Stan, 2013; Dawidson, 2004). This is a former socialist specific problem. There has been applied several solutions for different countries. Some governments chose to give the right to the tenants to buy "their" buildings. Other gave them to NGOs, in order to keep them as social housing. Yet others kept them in the public domain and used them as social houses. Some also restituted them back to the former owner (Pittini and Laino, 2011, p. 24, 28). Romanian legislation allowed some tenants to purchase their apartments, but also restitute the property rights to the former owner in other cases. After 2006 the state financialized its restitution policies, with former owners receiving financial compensations, a process that has generated extreme cases of corruption. No matter what solution they chose, housing restitution affected severely the social rented sector, diminishing its capacity and size.

With no public efforts in the construction new social housing or the acquisition of existing units in order to offer them as rentals, it comes as no surprise that municipal authorities claim that they cannot offer a solution for the people evicted (Tsenkova, 2009, p. 150, 152). The enforcement of the housing restitution legislation generated major housing problems. People were evicted from the homes they have been living in for decades, with no proper alternatives. Even though the local authorities in Bucharest had received from the Court final decisions on the retrocession years before the eviction, public authorities deal with each of the cases in terms of an emergency. This leaves the people depending on a waiting lists that consists of hundreds of requirements (Pittini and Laino, 2011, p. 24).

The Global Financial Crisis has worsened the situation. The European Commission has stated that housing exclusion is one of the biggest challenges after the financial crisis that erupted in 2009. Social exclusion, according to the institution's official strategies (Europe 2020[1]), must be dealt by creating affordable accommodation. EUROSTAT has now added new indicators that monitor housing conditions and the costs associated with it. Overcrowding and the quality of the house (such as access to running water, flushing toilets or the quality of the roof) are particularly monitored. As of 2011, there is an average of 6% of Europeans who suffer from severe housing deprivation. Romania has the highest percentage – 28.6%[2].

8.2. Main features of social housing in Bucharest

The main problem of social housing sector failure in Bucharest is the very lack of houses available to the local administration. There are hundreds of pending applications each year. I have met cases of people who have been placed on waiting lists for more than 10 years. Each year, there are tens of new applications and only a few available houses. Table 8.1 indicates the number of valid applications filled in. One may notice, the time series for each district are quite stable, which is indicative of the fact that the applications do not move ahead, but are passed on year after year.

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1   COM(2010) 758 final- Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. "The European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion: A European framework for social and territorial cohesion", December 2011.

2   Available online: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-and-housing-census/statistics-illustrated.

Table 8.2 indicates that the total numbers of housing units administered by each district[3].

Year/ District	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	District 6
2009	n/a	1351	1073	n/a	n/a	361
2010	364	1304	745	521	n/a	n/a
2011	269	1107	618	326	670	568
2012	338	1091	796	394	n/a	587
2013	343	1058	925	389	610	592
2014	n/a	1054	817	642	n/a	592

Table 8.2. The number of applications on waiting lists
Data source: I obtained the information based on a solicitation of public information sent to local authorities (FOIA).

District	Sector 1	Sector 2	Sector 3	Sector 4	Sector 5	Sector 6
No. houses	n/a	176	33**	287	n/a	136

Table 8.3. The number of housing units managed by the districts 2008–2014
Data source: FOIA requests.
** District 3 only gave me information on the houses received between 2005–2014.

Both the national and local housing programs – even as limited in scope as they are – focus on households with medium income. National housing programs aimed at reducing the social risks associated with living costs are focused on people with medium incomes, leaving the people who live in extreme poverty in the care of local authorities[4]. As Hegedus and Struyk have shown, the need for middle-income households to be supported by the state in facing the housing problems often competes and impedes the development of the social housing system for the poor (Hegedus and Struyk, 2005, p. 22). After having studied the budgets of district and central administration in Bucharest, I have found only two proposed social housing projects (in District 1 and District 3), but none of them

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3   I have no data on the houses that the main City Hall has in administration, as for the institution did not answer to my solicitation.
4   The national programs' objectives are to build homes for the young population (max. 35) and that are especially to be sold, not rented.

have materialized yet. This is a typical case of policy driven by thelocal resources and not by the local need (Lux, 2003, p. 39–67). Even though the law stipulates for the possibility for the central authorities to co-finance the construction of buildings dedicated to social housing, according to my research, there has been no such construction in Bucharest.

Who is responsible for social housing is also a contested terrain. The responsibility concerning social housing is diffuse in Bucharest, given the fact that there are six different districts and a central municipal administration. These administrative units have overlapping and unclear distribution of responsibility between them. Social housing is nominally owned by the central municipal administration. Each year, districts receive a few housing units to distribute to housing in needs. This creates a rather unclear legal context for petitioners: whom should they address and who should answer them. Households complain that they are sent from one institution to another and that they do not know which of the institutions should solve their problem. None of the regulations stipulate which institution should deal with these problems. The same illegibility reigns over whom inside the institutions should take over the petitions. Apparently, the people should first address to the District where they are registered and only if the lower level administration has no housing available, they should petition the central municipal administration.

Bureaucracy and the documents culture is another obstacle. One of the evicted persons nicely expressed the problems one encounters in such quests: "they ask us to fill in tons of documents. These papers are handed out to us piece by piece; the moment we have one paper, another one expires. And why do they ask for education papers? If I have no school, what, don't I deserve a shelter?". The "social file" as the call the social work inscriptions of the applicants consists of papers issued by different authorities, with different paces of response. Furthermore, District administration has different deadlines for these files to be completed. If they do not succeed in finishing in time with these documents, they must wait for the next year period, as the "social file" can only be completed yearly and must be renewed each year. For the people with no access to Internet and for illiterate ones, access to information is a very delicate problem. They depend on the information that is given by the social workers. To make the things worse, as I will show later on, the support from social workers is not appreciated among the people who should be their main beneficiaries, and for legitimate reasons.

Despite the official information on the situation, the NGOs claim that the situation is worse than shown. There are cases of people that do not have the necessary information nor the support to complete their files in time. What is more, there are extreme cases of people not having IDs and,

therefore, they cannot complete the documents for a social home. During the interviews with part of the local administration, they claimed, "there are no cases of people with no IDs. If they do not have documents, they are not citizens' of this District, therefore they are not our problem". This gives an account on the overall attitude of the local authorities towards people in need of a shelter.

The lack of legal support for people who are being evacuated resulted in cases of illegal evacuation is another significant problem. Accordingly to several NGO activists, there have been cases of people evicted without proper eviction papers. In such cases, the people do not have money to pay for legal support and they are forced to leave their homes. As I previously stated, one of the biggest corruption matters in Romania – and more so in Bucharest, given the high value of land – has been illegal housing restitution. Lacking legal support and proper information concerning their rights, such financially disadvantaged people become victims of the lawyer paid by the former owners.

Evictions of the people living in ex-nationalized houses come as no surprise for the local authorities. According to the law, the local authorities are notified when a Court gives its final ruling on a restitution case. Between the moment of notification and the eviction of tenants should pass, according to the law, no more than five years. Within this period, "somebody" should identify a solution for the people who are to be evicted. Despite this, local authorities become vaguely attentive to the future displaced just before the eviction. According to the interviewees, this happens because there is always a more critical case lined up ahead. Therefore, authorities deal with the eviction in terms of "crisis", with no strategy or public policy that should address this problem tenably.

8.3. The history and the practice of *Vulturilor* eviction

The case of *Vulturilor 50* is an iconic case of eviction from nationalized housing in Bucharest. On Vulturilor Street, at no. 50, lived 25 families, 100 people. Most of the families lived there with legal forms. Most of the families are Roma and most household members earn the minimum wage – that is if they haveemployment. In 2012, the initial tenants also received in "their" house some recent additions from another wave of evictions caused by an infrastructure public project[5].

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5 The project aimed at widening a street in a historical part of the city lead to the demolishing of 89 buildings. All the people were forced out of their buildings on 22th December 2010, despite the fact that they did non have another place to live.

These households have been living there since the communist period. The person with the oldest contract dates back to 1979. The people used to work for state companies, therefore, they received housing either through employment or through municipal housing offices. In 2001 the property rights over "their" building were restituted to the owner. Between 2001 and 2006 the people lived there with the consent of the owner, as the private owner was forced to sign a contract with them. As soon as the households learned that "their" house was restituted in 2001, they began filling out applications for social housing.

In 2007 the owner sold the entire building to a real estate investor. Since that moment, the households have lived illegally , as the new owner refused to sign newcontracts. Despite this, they were allowed to stay there through an informal settlement with the owner. With no other solution in hand and even if they had no legal documents they have accepted these terms. Rents differed from family to family. Such informal agreements are common practice among poor households living in restituted housing, since the owners try to make some money out of their buildings until they have the necessary funds for an investment. In 2009, the legal bodies decided that the families could be evicted. After the households learned that, they also added this piece of information to their yearly application.

In September 2014, they all received a notification that in less than a week the owner will evict them from the building. Prior to eviction, according to the people to whom I talked, they were tricked into signing a form consenting to eviction. Without proper legal advice and with the promise of receiving some amount of money and a postponment of the eviction for an indefinite term, the people signed that they agree tomoving out. One middle-aged person explained "they took my mother to the Court House. They told her something about some money that they were to give us and they convinced her. They came and took as one by one". On September 15, 2014 the local police and gendarmerie came to enforce the eviction order. This coincides in Romania with the first day of school. Some of the people went with their children to school so the latter would not witness the eviction. The people were forced out of their homes, with little time to take their belongings and, in some cases, even their IDs.

After the eviction, people who lived there legally decided to protest on the street, in front of the house they had been evicted from. The protests consisted in 15 families this is 65 people. As for the rest of the people, they either accepted the financial support in order to pay a rent on the free market or they have found shelter among their relatives. Among them there were 22 children, three of which arevery young. They spent the entire winter, until late March on the street. With the support of some

activists, they gathered mattresses, tents, blankets and they set up a "resistance camp" (as the activists call it) on the sidewalk. Despite these things, the people lacked important infrastructure, such as toilets, bathrooms and kitchens to cook. A strong community gathered around them and tried to offer voluntarily support. Activists cooked a hot meal per day, offering to wash clothes for them and donated warm clothes during the winter.

A week after the eviction, the local authorities sent the municipal garbage company to collect the people's belongings from the sidewalk. When confronted, a representative in the municipal council explained that this dispossession of personal goods is motivated because "the public space is abusively occupied by this garbage". People accused them of stealing their goods. One woman explained that: "they told us that we could take them from the local garbage company in maximum two weeks time. They did not tell us though where this company is located. Moreover, they told us that if they would find them again on the sidewalk, they were to confiscate them again and fine us. But where to put them if we have no other place to call home other than this sidewalk?".

After the eviction, the representatives of the NGOs filled in an official request to the General City Hall in order to get the authorities approval to erect big size tents. Bear in mind that this was during the fall, and there was the risk of people sleeping in the rain. The authorities denied their request because tents would have occupied part of the road dedicated to cars. Another request to public authorities was aimed at obtaining a public mobile toilet within the area. After three months following the official petition, the District City Hall agreed to allow the people to install it. After the weather got colder, the people installed small tents on the sidewalk. These proved to be inefficient because they were not waterproof. Therefore, they built improvised cottages, out of scrap wood they found elsewhere throughout the city. No significant changes occurred between January and March in terms of the logistics of the camp.

The people evicted received no visit from any municipal representatives. Some people and the activists who supported them tried to reach the mayor of the District 3 and protested in front of the City Hall, but they received no answer. A coalition of 50 NGOs filled in a request for a public audience with the mayor of District 3 and the mayor of the central administration. They received no answer between late September and mid-March. The real estate investor who bought the building is an investor from Norway. One NGO sought to get the Embassy of Norway involved, by asking them about their point of view on these events. The Embassy answered back and even wrote to the District Administration, offering to meet withboth with the NGO and government officials. The Embassy never heard back from the District Administration.

At the beginning of October 2014, the Ministry for Dialogue with Civil Society pushed for a discussion with the representatives of Districts administration and the central municipal administration. The Minister also invited some of the NGOs involved in advocacy, as well as an evicted person from that community. At the meeting, the representative of District 3 admitted that she only went there on the day of the eviction. She complained that "we could not talk to nobody. How to help if everybody ignored me?" ignoring that fact that applications for social housing were filled in 2001 and that tenants notified local administration of the eviction since 2009. The representative of District 3 further stigmatized and inflicted further violence on the tenants (Wacquant, 2009, p. 24). She explained that she did not return to monitor the situation because "of their aggressiveness and their reluctance to accept the proposed solution". Aside that the only solution was structural violence, what was shocking was that this was that the representative was a social worker.

The only available solution offered by the District 3 representative was to shelter the mothers and minors aged younger than 16 within shelters for abused mothers, and the fathers within the night shelters. The solution also specified that after spending "a few months (sic)" in these institutions, the households will receive housing. The representative quickly added that this will happen "only in case when there is a sufficient house stock". If such housing will not be available, the District administration explained that they will offer financial help, so that they could pay rent on the unregulated rental market. People refused this two-step solution, mainly because it meant separating the families. Another reason was that the men that were to be sheltered only during the night were not allowed inside the center for "abused women". Thus, they were supposed to spend the day on the street, meeting their wife and children only rarely. One woman explained to the social worker that "you have to understand, we have a culture, this is how we are. We have to be together. This how, we, Roma are – our family is our only precious thing in life. We cannot break apart. And what is my man to do during the day, after work? Wonder the streets until the night comes and they are not allowed within the center? And why to go to a center for abused women? Am I abused? I tell you that I want my husband near my children and you want us to be separated. I am abused by the state, not by my husband".

The abusive position of the social worker of the local district deserves further attention for understanding the violence inflicted on these people. At the meeting, the social worker threatened the people to take away their children and intern them into state institutions. She attempted

to silence their claims by pointing out that she has the power to separate their children from them. This is her: "you know, we will not wait too long and come to take your children. These are not conditions to raise a child. You should bear in mind this and you should not use your children as a means to blackmail us". Within the interviews that I have conducted with representatives of public authorities (responsible for social assistance), I have identified elements that are in rather contradiction with their mission. For example, there is a current opinion among them that the people asking for social housing are not willingly to work so that they could afford to live independently. On the other hand, people suffering from extreme poverty argue that the private rental sector is inaccessible to them because of their badly paid jobs that could not support them in the current free market-housing sector. Hence, their only support is institutional housing system.

Because the social workers planned to come again on the field accompanied by police, NGOs offered to coordinate individual meetings with the social workers, so that to avoid other possible tensions. One of the firm decisions taken within the meeting was that the people were to be treated with priority, as cases of extreme emergency. After the meeting, during 3 months, all the families had their social inquiries completed, but no final decision on allocating them a social house was made. The official reason was that they are trying to find a building big enough for the community to be placed.

Another reason to refuse the above mentioned solution was the mistrust people have for local authorities. They were sure that if they were to abandon the protest camp, their force would disintegrate and the modest echoes of their cause would be silenced. With no certainty over what "a few months" before their receive social housing really means and a deadline of six months of being allowed in these centers, people feared that they would be once again be thrown in the street. Therefore, they chose to protest collectively until they were given social houses.

On the other hand, they explained to the local authorities that receiving financial help for paying rent is not a solution for their situation, because of rent market racism. One person explained that "part of us have children with disabilities, who is going to let us in their homes? We are Gypsies, nobody trust us with their homes". Another problematic structural aspect is the reluctance of landlords to actually fill in leasing contracts in general. In Romania, officially, less than 1% of the people have their homes rented. Landlords usually avoid paying taxes, renting the house on the black market (Hegedus and Struyk, 2005, p. 1, 6). With rather poor legislation on renting houses and with no control from the state as for a medium

price for this sector[6], Romania's rental market is rather contributing to the lower part of economy (Amann, 2013, p. 37).

Whereas "the left hand of the state" is crippled when it comes offering help, "the right hand of the state" (Bourdiueu, 1992) is highly visible for these people. Periodically, there are visits from the Police on the street where they now live. The people were told that they come to "inspect the public health condition". The evicted perceive this as an act of intimidation. What is more, the authorities told the people living there that they have information that their children do not sleep there, but their placed during the night to neighbors or relatives and they are just using them for emotional blackmail. But this actually did not happened as I noticed during my visits on the Vulturilor.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to give an account of the linkages between evictions, restitution and the complete abandonment of social housing by the Romanian state after 1990. Although social housing has become an "increasingly obscure concept" due to housingprivatization policies throughout Europe (Primaeus and Dielman, 2002, p. 191), the experience of shrinking the social sector varies from place to place. In Romania and in Bucharest in particular, social housing evaporation has led to evictions, intense social suffering andconjugated efforts of local administration to bypass structural problems.

In particular, I described the cumulative macro processes and the everyday unfolding of an eviction from District 3 in September 2014. The *Vulturilor 50* case is only the most recent in Bucharest, similar cases have happened since the restitution law has been enforced in Romania (1990). The public authorities response was late and geared towards moving the problem elsewhere – outside of Bucharest, in temporary shelters in total institutions, at the garbage dump– rather than pay attention and try to address the long series of evictions that plagued poor households since the late 1990s. In this case, "punishing the poor" (Waquant, 2009) went hand in hand with the revanchist attitude towards the Roma who occupy old housing stock in the central area of Bucharest (Berescu, 2011).

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6   There is no reglementation on how trates for rental housing are set. Despite the fact tatthe real estate websites stipulates ratesfor houses tfor rent, only a very small part of these are acctually registred as being rented and the value of the contract is much less than in reality so that the taxes are smaller. In these conditions, tenants in Romania lack the means of protection.

Despite such episodes, many commentators still oppose welfare provision for households who are at severe risk of social and economic marginalization. Bearing in mind the high costs for housing in Romania (especially in Bucharest) as my data indicate it is astonishing that many commentators still advocate the further shrinking of social rights. This is not only limited to middle class families who advocate gentrification (although they do not call it as such) of Bucharest, but to the top and lay representatives of local administration. As I have shown above, they do not shy away from symbolic violence, expressing stereotypes, threatening and intimidating residents of the city who lack power.

Based on this episode, the statistical data that I have provided, the lack of any safety net for vulnerable households and the interviews that I carried out with public administrators in Bucharest, one could claim that we are actually faced with an endemic discriminatory attitude towards households who are at risk of being homeless. What is also worrying is that there is no discussion on the political and public agenda about any housing rights, including the right to proper housing. Such cases barely make it to alternative media outlets, and almost never to the mainstream media ones. The limited or non-existent scope of social housing policy became a more salient issue, due to the financial crisis, as more and more middle-income people found it harder to pay their mortgages or to pay their rents, therefore, the state had to focus on helping them (Fentsa, 2011, p. 26).

Being poor and a part of an ethnic minority group often attracts discriminatory measures from Bucharest administration, both in its long term face – bureaucracy and in the form of "everyday state" – Police, social workers, garbage cleaning companies. Such households are often mis-informed and they lack the financial and media power to advocate their rights. They are aware that public authorities treat them with disrespect and that they are being taken advantage of. Their only choice is to wait for state support in the matter of housing (Tsenkova, 2009, p. 150–154).

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