



## ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Insidious Whiteness in Eastern Europe: Environmental Injustice and Dehumanisation in a Roma Community

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## ABSTRACT

Even in Eastern Europe, whiteness organises space, race, class and environmental justice research. Inspired by whiteness theory, we draw on a case of environmental injustice affecting the Roma community of Dăroaia—a segregated neighbourhood in Roșia Montană—in the context of the mining conflict over the eponymous gold mine. We analyse how whiteness as ‘gadjoness’ dehumanises Roma communities through institutionalised mundane practices of spatial and discursive exclusion. Whiteness operates as an insidious power relation, which we set about to expose. Following a historical approach to racial exploitation in Eastern Europe and analysing 31 interviews with local actors, we apply a reflexive methodology to question the constitution of race and whiteness in Romania. Our results show how socio-environmental injustice is reproduced through racism and whiteness, is inscribed in space and normalised through racist institutional practices, but is also exposed and challenged by Roma agency.

## XARNI PREZENTACIA

And-i Estikani-Evropa, o mangipen te aves parno thol rigăthe o spacio, i vica thai i klasa thaj vi o rodipen e soțialo thaj diosqo krisaço. Inspirisarde katar kadaja teoria, sikavas o kezo e medosqe bilaçhimata kerde save keren nasul e rromane komunitetaqe andar i Dăroaia—jekh segregome zona anda-i Roșia Montana—ando kontksto e çingarenqo phangle e but-șunde sovnakajesqi minaça. Godisaras sar kadava mangipen sar priviležiaqe sistemo e gazenqo (*gadjoness*) peravel o manușikanimos e rromane komunitetenqo, mașkar institucionalizato praktike kerde palem thaj palem kaj te çinel o akceso k-ol thana thaj vakãripen. O mangipen te aves parno dikhel pes sar jekh institucionalo zorãqi relacia savi dikhel pes dikhindoj andar jekh istoria e rasialo labãrisaço and-i Estikani-Evropa, o rodipen palal trinvardeș thaj jekh inteviuurã e thanutne aktorurãença thaj jekh refleksivo metodologiaça vaș o rasialo bidikhipen ando rodipen. E rezultaturã sikaven sar e soțialo tah medosqe bangimata si palemkerde, xramosarde and-o spacio thaj normalisarde katar o institucionalo rasismo, tha vi e prasade e romenøar. (Translated into Romani by Valentin Nuța and Ionuț Petaca.)

## 1 | Introduction

Whiteness in Eastern Europe (EE) has historically taken shape in the context of this region being marginalised from the constructed Western core of whiteness and often experiencing ‘dirty white’ resentment (Böröcz 2021). Within this unstable

positioning, whiteness operates not only as a relation between West and East, but also as a mechanism that produces internal hierarchies. Recent work has highlighted how Roma populations in Eastern Europe have been historically racialised as non-white, and at times explicitly associated with forms of ‘blackness’, reinforcing their exclusion from the imagined

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national community and complicating assumptions about the region as racially homogenous (Turda and Balogun 2025). In this paper, we shed light on a specific form of environmental racism and injustice against Roma, which is carried out through whiteness. Conducting a long-term case study of the Roşia Montană (henceforth RM) mining conflict, we noticed how imposing whiteness created dehumanisation, an ‘absolute form of racialization’ (Matache 2026, 4). We expose and analyse this dehumanisation through the spatial and discursive mechanisms of exclusion in the post-mining community of Dăroaia in Roşia Montană.

We employ here a relational approach to the study of race, constituted along a bipolar understanding of whiteness/gad-joness vs. Roma-ness with an eye for how it produces dehumanisation in space. Inspired by Pulido’s understanding of whiteness as white supremacy—that is the ‘belief that white people are superior to people of color’ (Pulido 2015, 812)—we document how whiteness structures local space and normalises racist institutional practices in Dăroaia towards vulnerability and potentially premature death (Gilmore 2007). To better contextualise how insidious whiteness as segregation and exclusion of Roma-ness has formed, we offer a historical view of racialisation in EE (Matei 2020; Petcuţ 2020) as well as racial and socio-psychological interpretations of dehumanisation (Matache 2026; Smith 2011). We use these concepts to address the question: *How does insidious whiteness dehumanise the Roma, what forms does it take, and how is this process challenged by Roma agency?* This question is particularly meaningful given that the dehumanisation of the Roma from Dăroaia has reached its climax at a time when the struggle for environmental injustice and recognition in RM was at its peak.

The racialisation of Roma is rooted in a pre-capitalist regime of enslavement and exploitation, which has enabled a distinct European form of imperial extractivism and was continued through capitalist, socialist and post-socialist structures. The racial dimension produced and kept the Roma as an inferiorised race for much of this time (Powell and Lever 2017), ensuring the predominance of whiteness. We expose this through our case study, which is located in a former gold mining region in the Western Carpathians of Romania. The Dăroaia neighbourhood is a space created by whiteness within RM, cut in half by a railway line, with informal dwellings squeezed between passing steam engines and a flooding river, with little potable water and a ubiquitous risk of landslides. When floods and landslides hit Dăroaia in 2021 and the Roma were relocated to the centre of RM, white voices demanded their re-segregation on a polluted site at the periphery, where some of them still reside (Alexandrescu et al. 2026).

The same white voices made RM internationally known for its environmental justice struggle (Alexandrescu 2020; Pop 2014; Velicu and Kaika 2017). This conflict has attracted progressive activists alongside critical academics, all of whom have supported the cause of the ‘people of Roşia Montană’ against the ‘greedy’ extractive interests. It led to the best-known and most visible civic movement in post-2000 Romania. However, none of these voices realised that the visible struggle of the *roşieni* (gadjo/white RM residents) overshadowed the struggle for recognition

of the Roma from Dăroaia. In hindsight, we argue that the Save Roşia Montană (SRM) movement was race-unaware and the accompanying scholarly research was race-blind. This article contributes to unpacking the insidiousness and depth of whiteness in an EE space that has preferred to see itself as white (Baker et al. 2024).

The paper is structured as follows. We start from the literature on environmental injustice, whiteness, history of (post)slavery and dehumanisation. We then present our reflexive methodology, aiming to disclose our positionality, followed by our analysis of dehumanisation and its spatial and discursive workings. The latter is broken down in three subsections: the historical making of dehumanisation in space, the relational and discursive forms of dehumanisation, and the workings of whiteness through the lens of Roma agency. The concluding section offers a starting point for Roma environmental justice research.

## 2 | Whiteness and Dehumanisation in Eastern Europe

Whiteness creates racial structures that dehumanise the non-white other. This dynamic remains critically underexplored in the environmental justice literature in Eastern Europe. In the first study of environmental injustice affecting the Roma in EE, Harper et al. (2009) take the initial step of going beyond the white, young, middle-class frame of environmental concern and argue that the environmental discrimination against the racialised Roma in EE also needs to be recognised. Later, Vincze and Zamfir (2019, 446) distinguish ‘whiteness ... [from] non-white subject positions’ and connect them to housing unevenness in Cluj Napoca. In painfully expressive terms, they show how ‘the pauperized working-class Roma ... [live] a low-cost, close-to-earth life in a polluted horizontally confined ... “[G\*psyhood]” near the city’s garbage landfill ... [while] the upper-middle-class whiteness ... enjoy[s] its sanitized existence in a close-to-the-sky highlife at “the heart of the city”’ (Vincze and Zamfir 2019, 456).

A recent special issue of *Critical Romani Studies* (Dunajeva and Szilvasi 2024) is devoted to Roma and environmental justice in Europe. The authors demonstrate that environmental justice for Roma communities in Europe cannot be understood separately from structural racism, historical marginalisation and racial capitalism, which together expose Roma to severe environmental injustices—from forced relocation to toxic zones, to lack of access to clean water, safe housing, public infrastructure and waste collection (Dunajeva and Szilvasi 2024; Saethre 2024). However, in these studies, whiteness and its non-white other tend to be seen as static entities. In contrast, we propose a dynamic understanding of whiteness as ‘reiterative practice’ (Butler 1993), including its spatial and institutional forms that ensure its dominance.

To achieve this dynamic understanding of whiteness, we start from *Off White* (Baker et al. 2024), which interrogates the Eastern European myth of being ‘outside’ Western colonial complicity. This myth is sustained by the region’s longstanding framing as ‘racially innocent’ and shows how racial

logics have been—and continue to be—reproduced there. This very ‘innocence’ functions as a form of white ignorance, a structured blindness that allows the region to claim the position of racelessness while simultaneously reproducing both internal and external racial hierarchies (Mark et al. 2024). In the same vein, James Mark and colleagues demonstrate that Central-Eastern European states were incorporated into the global racial order as ‘small white nations’, confirming that whiteness functions as a global infrastructure of exclusion. Victoria Schmidt’s (2024) chapter further problematises internal racialisation, through concepts such as ‘self-isolation’, which means that responsibility for segregation is projected onto racialised groups, rendering structural violence invisible. In sum, *Off White* makes clear that whiteness is not merely a Western or imperial process but a colonial dynamic architecture in which EE nations are both produced and actively participating in.

Matache adapts the EE whiteness concept by using the Romani-derived term *gadjoness*, defined as ‘an early manifestation of whiteness that has been shaped to craft a standard identity and establish a system of power and privilege for *gadjikane* individuals in Europe’ (Matache 2026, 4). In what follows, we use whiteness generically when we refer to the alleged innocence of Eastern European colonial complicity (Baker et al. 2024) and *gadjoness*, as a form of whiteness, when we discuss concrete instances of Roma/non-Roma interactions, similar to Bunescu’s (2014) study on Roma identities. Matache (2026) draws an explicit link between the imposition of whiteness or *gadjoness* and the resulting dehumanisation of those deemed inferior or animal-like, amounting to an absolute form of racialisation.

While a comprehensive overview of the historical relationship between *gadjo* and Roma is beyond the scope of this paper, we see evidence of this relation beginning with the arrival of the Roma in Europe and their enslavement (*robie*) in the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Beck 1989). Western scholars from the eighteenth century, such as Grellmann (Suciu 2008), carried out ‘Zigeuner’ studies, which were already employing the language of colour. This was soon adopted by the Habsburg monarchy and its implementation had deeply dehumanising consequences. The Roma were called African and black, while Europeans were considered white (Mark et al. 2024). Roma slavery in the Romanian Principalities entrenched certain characteristics of *robie*, as embryos of Roma’s later exploitation during and after the abolition of slavery in 1856. These embryonic features were their total dependence on the owners, their lack of civil rights and ownership over land, capital and entitlements (Petcuț 2020, 2025). The cultural elongations of slavery are felt to this day in Romania (Rusu 2025). But Roma were produced as different and inferior on a number of levels: politically disenfranchised by a majority, white-dominated electoral system, economically marginalised by capital-driven modernisation and relegated by the state to a few economic niches (Matei 2020).

To deepen the understanding of racialisation as dehumanisation, we draw on Smith’s (2011) theory of ‘removing the humanness’ of a social group. In the paradox of dehumanisation, ‘the

dehumaniser ends up with two contradictory beliefs. The belief that these people are human coexists ... with the belief that they’re subhuman’ (Smith 2020, 164). For a better understanding of our case, we select the concept of dehumanisation, which assumes that the only legitimate interests are those of white people, while reducing the non-white to an animal and object-like status (Ukabhai 2024). This paradox of dehumanisation opens the possibility to challenge the monolithic character of whiteness and dehumanisation, setting them in motion, creating dynamism and even interstices through which humanity can be affirmed. The dynamic element is an ongoing challenge to whiteness, as the Roma’s agency in our case has revealed.

One of the faces of dehumanisation is the creation of spaces that limit the engagement of Roma with the *gadjo* individuals and institutions. These spaces are created by whiteness for the purpose of limiting social interaction and creating distance, highlighting the entrapment of dehumanisation in space. In the EE context, a study of Roma evicted to a waste dump next to a major city in Romania revealed how whiteness is institutionally enforced:

Racism operated to conceive those who were not “competitive” on the housing market as non-persons, or as sub-humans who did not fit into the ideal-type personhood, and who allegedly deserved no better than to be placed into dehumanising spaces, whose disgrace was eventually transformed into a dishonour projected onto the bodies of its inhabitants.

(Vincze 2019, 76)

Other research has found that local discourses of white supremacy, for example in cities such as Miercurea Ciuc and Târgu Mureș, have rationalised evictions to environmentally degraded infrastructures such as former industrial plants or wastewater treatment facilities (Alexandrescu et al. 2021). Another city in which we recognise the reproduction of whiteness is Bucharest, with its *piața de droguri* (global drug market) ‘which territorialises itself on racialised bodies’ (Lancione 2022, 1154). The common denominator of all these infrastructures is their apartness, their being set aside from white territories, what Magda Matache has called in Romani *dur-rigate-dinipe* (‘organised apartness’):

*Gadjikane* [white] institutions have historically imposed and legalized segregated neighborhoods and communities, pushing Roma families to the peripheries of towns, cities, or villages, into mahalas or shacks. By confining Roma to isolated, marginalized, and frequently polluted areas, local authorities have constantly marked the borders of zones of state violence, neglect, and the systematic violation of rights and liberties.

(Matache 2026, 282)

Within spatial dehumanisation, racialised bodies and their needs and hopes are confined to places of hopelessness, to ‘prison[s] without walls’ (Fernández 2025, 253), while their capabilities (energy, labour, votes) are selectively taken from the

*dur-rigate-dinipe* (Matache 2026)—to the benefit of the white majority.

To conclude, it is impossible to speak of white racism without seeing its dehumanising consequences. In Eastern Europe, the alleged ‘racial innocence’ is rehearsed through practices and discourses in everyday life, normalising and institutionalising it. Dehumanising the Roma also means transforming their daily spaces into unliveable habitats and reinforcing white privilege by mundane practices of human devaluation.

### 3 | Reflexive Methodology: Engaging With Positionality

To understand the implications of our positionality, we describe the context in which our research has been carried out. Roşia Montană is a *cause célèbre* of an environmental justice conflict stretching over more than two decades. This conflict was caused by a proposed gargantuan expansion of the state-owned open cast gold mine in RM, promoted by the Canadian–Romanian mining company Roşia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC). It all started in 2000 when the company began purchasing properties to make way for its mine. A jigsaw-like conflict followed, pitting the local NGO Alburnus Maior and its national and international allies united under the ‘Save Roşia Montană’ movement against RMGC, the town hall and national actors. RMGC sued Romania before the World Bank’s Investor-State Dispute Settlement tribunal in 2015 for \$6.7 billion but lost the trial in a landmark 2024 decision (Triefus and Velicu 2025; Velicu et al. 2026). When the conflict ended, about 80% of the property owners in RM had sold their properties to RMGC.

The complexity of the case outlined above has been previously explored by gadjo researchers (e.g., Alexandrescu 2011, 2013, 2020; Alexandrescu and Baldus 2017; Velicu 2014, 2015; Velicu and Kaika 2017). Two decades later, these two authors come into regular intellectual exchange with two Roma researchers, one artist-scholar and one scholar-activist. They have created a collaborative engagement that has critically reconsidered the previous research of the gadjo scholars. Although the senior scholars initially paid close attention to topics such as environmental and social injustice, uncertainty, vulnerability, visibility and egalitarian politics in RM, none of them noticed the ‘elephant in the room’, which was the struggle for justice of the Roma community from Dăroaia. Despite having had multiple opportunities to apply these theoretical tools across the whiteness line, these authors focussed on the dramas and suffering of white privileged property owners.

Our research moves beyond the previous white blindness, taking place in a changed context, both in RM and in the composition of our research team. We outline below our positionality in the research field to make transparent the potential biases that our research might still carry. Between the time of these writings and the current research, two important and serendipitous changes have occurred. First, the previously documented struggle (2005–2014) came to an end with the withdrawal of the mining company from RM. The residents’ focus shifted onto alternative development opportunities, of which tourism is currently a key strategy. Our 2024 interviews with (some) of

the same residents from the previous period revealed a distinct preoccupation with defining RM as a white space of European values and belonging. From their silencing at the height of the conflict, the Roma have become problematically visible to the unhindered dominance of emancipated whiteness in RM.

Second, we reconsider what previous research did not (want to) see in RM. This was gradually prompted by the participation of Roma scholars as key researchers in our team. Theoretically, they helped foreground racial critical theory and the history of racial exploitation. Empirically, they have established an improved and culturally sensitive rapport with the Roma community from Dăroaia. This collaborative endeavour has gradually, albeit partially, erased the previous racial blind spots. Although our team was ethnically mixed, including Roma and non-Roma, we were all scholars funded by an EU research project, enjoying privileged lives compared to the Roma community in Dăroaia. The power imbalance between us and our research participants was evident during our fieldwork, also revealed by the obstacles we have encountered in entering the community and gaining their trust. While Roma leaders were open to discuss with us, some of the residents of Dăroaia have shown resistance to our presence.

Our engagement in Dăroaia presented some ethical challenges. Even if we were among the first scholars to enter Dăroaia, the community was already exhausted and suspicious of our presence, due to repeated inquiries from journalists that negatively portrayed the community. Many of the residences are informal and are therefore seen negatively by the local authorities, making the Roma hesitant to welcome anyone who could draw attention to this fact, including ourselves as researchers. We entered the field in Dăroaia with this positionality, which, despite its challenges, made us aware of their struggle for recognition in the face of white exclusion.

The context of the floods that the Dăroaia community endured in 2021 and the threat of flooding in RM in 2022 offered two contrasting insights into how whiteness systematically regulates who is allowed or disallowed to be protected against calamities. As we will analyse the floods, we provide here a short description. One flood occurred in July 2021 and affected 72 houses, damaged 17 of them and led to the emergency evacuation of 246 persons, much more than in any other surrounding community (Alexandrescu et al. 2026). There were no fatalities, but the most affected and vulnerable residents were forced to permanently relocate on the site of the former mining processing plant. RM was also under threat from floods in October 2022 but, unlike what happened in Dăroaia in 2021, the preventive action of the authorities averted any major damage or loss.

In May and July 2024, we carried out 31 semi-structured qualitative individual and group interviews on the ground (see Figure 1). These included 11 women and 20 men, of which there were four Roma women and six Roma men. We followed up with six online interviews with non-local stakeholders, including three women and three men, of which there was one Roma woman and two Roma men. The sampling was based on the senior authors’ previous contacts with activists and local authorities. Roma respondents were approached starting from the Facebook profiles of local leaders and via participant observation



**FIGURE 1** | Case study location (Dăroaia). Map data: Google, ©2025 Airbus.

by the more junior authors. The interviewees included leaders of the Roma community in Dăroaia, its inhabitants, local RM authorities, local entrepreneurs and other residents.

Given this heterogeneous sample, we expected to see differences across the racial, class and gender lines but also to gain insight into how whiteness is mapped onto the local space. The latter is itself fractured between the central, more urban part of RM and the peripheral and excluded part, containing Dăroaia. With the inclusion of central RM on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2021, whiteness has been defined as a European value, giving gadjo residents a political voice and enhancing their independent livelihoods based on land, education, craft or capital.

The interviews have been recorded with the interviewees' informed consent, transcribed using Vatis Tech and analysed using Maxqda. To complement the interviews, we also employed documentary sources. We engage in a historical approach to the situation of the Roma, one that follows how whiteness shifted across regimes of slavery and colonial exploitation, socialist-era proletarianisation and contemporary 'European' gadjiness.

We are aware that our positionality may risk reproducing certain white biases. Even if our team includes Roma scholars, we can at most present an intersubjective, rather than objective, picture. For us this also creates an ethical dilemma: how can we accurately document these conditions without further exposing the community to a greater risk of state retaliation? Our analysis aims to raise awareness of how insidiously whiteness operates, while acknowledging the perseverance of Roma agency.

We outline our argument and flesh it out with empirical evidence in the following three sections. The first discusses how whiteness has historically shaped hierarchies and territories and how Dăroaia emerged as a space of dehumanisation. The second delves into the heart of dehumanisation by revealing how whiteness is performed by a variety of actors, state, corporate and grassroots. The last subsection unpacks the insidiousness of whiteness, inspired by the insights of some local Roma themselves.

#### 4 | Whiteness and Dehumanisation in Dăroaia

We postulate that whiteness in Roşia Montană has involved an increasingly strict separation between the lives and life chances of the Roma and the gadjo residents. This is most visible in the contrasting spaces in which life takes place: life is demeaned and dehumanised for the Roma and allowed to flourish for the gadjo. In what follows, we show that historically, whiteness has functioned as racial imperialism separating white 'masters' (Austrians and Hungarians) and less-than-white exploited subjects (Wallachian/Romanian and G\*psy/Roma). We are aware that racial imperialism created finer gradations of whiteness vs. blackness even among those exploited, which placed the Roma at the lowest rung of the imperial order. With the gradual emancipation of Wallachians and the emergence of the Romanian nation state (1859/1918), the whiteness line shifted and solidified, within a process of 'whitening the nation'. This process involved a lifting up of Romanians from exploited subjects to internal colonisers. Following the model of imperial colonisers, they re-ordered the social hierarchy to extract value from those seen as less white and less human, particularly the Roma.

Transylvania has been a key hinterland of several empires over the centuries, providing gold for the Roman, Hungarian and later Austro-Hungarian colonial powers (Rotaru and Gaunt 2023). All historical accounts point to gold as state or imperial property, even if the extraction of gold was carried out by racialised exploited labour. Recent research on Transylvania has termed this process creolisation, which is a mixing of unequal groups (ethnic, occupational, language, etc.) under the sway of imperial power relations (Pârvolescu and Boatcă 2022). From this, we infer that Roma and Romanian miners in Transylvania were involved in exploitative relationships within Hungarian and later Austro-Hungarian power structures, but to different degrees. This shows that the colour line has followed ethnic differences but has also been shaped by class inequalities (exploiters vs. exploited).

Under the socialist racial regime, the Roma population was forcibly assimilated as part of the policy of building a homogeneous white nation state (Anghel 2024; Gheorghe and Mirga 2001). Towards the end of state socialism in 1990, the racial line had shifted and further solidified in reinforcing whiteness. This is visible in the account of a Roma leader who described the RM socialist workforce as consisting of ‘one work shift [composed] of Romanians and two shifts of Roma’ (male retired Roma miner, RM, 2024). As Nicolae Gheorghe observed, a Romani proletariat as a distinct segment of the ‘working class’ was created during this time. The majority of Roma communities continued to be segregated residentially and socially, while being dependent on the state for employment and welfare provision (Gheorghe and Mirga 2001). This combination of segregation and dependence created the conditions for their dehumanisation and vulnerability after the end of state socialism. Once the state withdrew from the industrial economy and relinquished its employment and welfare functions after 1990, the Roma found themselves trapped in decaying segregated housing infrastructures in which they suddenly became ‘illegal’ tenants. After the closure of the state-owned mines in 2006 in RM, some of the former Roma miners and their children worked in the informal economy as day labourers, while others worked as manual workers. Our observations on the ground in 2024 indicate that although there is an above-average number of professionals among the Roma, such as teachers, school and medical mediators, entrepreneurs and local councillors, most of the other Roma are underemployed in lower-skilled jobs.

Dăroaia is an illustrative case of the current racial capitalist regime, acquiring the features of a highly racialised and dehumanised space. We infer this from the following facts and figures. Whereas the gadjo population of RM is evenly distributed over a wide area, the Roma residents, amounting to 25% of the population, have been confined to just 1% of the residential space (Alexandrescu et al. 2026). The housing rights of Roma are still not legally recognised, according to a social worker (young woman, RM, 2019). In contrast, the gadjo residents, particularly those within the former RMGC project footprint, clarified their housing and property rights, which enabled them to sell their real estate to RMGC, usually maximising their benefits (Alexandrescu 2013).

The demographic growth of the community started 100 years ago, when they moved to the proximity of the railway line to

work as iron smiths (middle-aged Roma man, RM, 2024). Since then, the community grew progressively in size. From the initial five families to 76 individuals in 1966, 148 in 1977 and 214 in 1992 (Varga 2002). The latest 2021 census counted 395 Roma residents in Dăroaia, but this number is likely much higher, as indicated by local Roma leaders who estimated the number to be about 1000 inhabitants. It is evident that the fastest population growth occurred during the 1990s within the same confined space bounded by the Abrudel river, which occasionally floods the lower part of the settlement. The post-socialist racial regime has reinforced the whiteness line and increased the vulnerability of the community to the point of continuous exposure to life-threatening conditions, while blaming the Roma for ‘always preferring to be near the water’ and refusing to be relocated from there (former local activist, RM, 2024). This is a recurrent trope of white supremacy in EE (Costache 2019; Shmidt 2024), visible in the way the authorities prioritise gadjo lives and properties in stark contrast to neglecting the Roma settlements during natural hazards.

We outline below these two diametrically opposed responses to a similar threat of flooding: one in racialised Dăroaia (July 2021) and the other in central RM (October 2022). In Dăroaia, it was only after several hours of torrential rain that the authorities decided to intervene, some time after the residents themselves and volunteers had mobilised for the rescue. Among the latter, Roma leaders from national and county levels were also involved. The local authority in RM minimised the problem, saying that ‘it rains with 200 litres per square meter everywhere’ and therefore no special measures are required in Dăroaia (male representative, RM, 2024). In contrast, in central RM authorities took preventive action to avoid any possible loss of life or damage from the overflowing *Tăul Mare* lake. In the latter case, the mayor acted fast by calling the rescue service at night and the chief of Romanian rescue services came personally to coordinate the intervention. In Dăroaia, the environment minister only visited the area some 10 days later, without taking visible action. As seen in this photograph,<sup>1</sup> private and NGO actors sprang into rescue action for the families evacuated from Dăroaia, whereas in RM, a 36-strong armada of emergency vehicles responded to the appeal of authorities (Adam 2022). Most importantly, in Dăroaia the RM mayor did not carry out the legally required geotechnical study on future threats facing the community even 3 years later, while in RM the authorities completely eliminated the risk of flooding by lowering the water table of *Tăul Mare*. While the gadjo residents have since enjoyed a safe living in central RM, the Roma of Dăroaia still live with the fear of being buried alive by landslides or killed by floodwaters.

Dăroaia is also delimited by a near-vertical hill, susceptible to deadly landslides. This is not the case with RM at large, in which there are no similar risks for the inhabitants. The only access points to Dăroaia are two exceedingly narrow passes to the North and the South of the community. The Southern entry/exit route crosses a metal railway bridge that is impassable for any motorised vehicle and even unsafe for pedestrian crossing. The whole community is traversed by a narrow-gauge railway line, less than one meter close to residents’ homes (see Figure 2). The train is occasionally used by tourists, while the community is portrayed as a ‘no-go area’ and likened to an ‘Indian slum’ (see photograph).<sup>2</sup> The only communal water supplies are two single taps at each end of the settlement. On the other hand, *roșieni* are



**FIGURE 2** | Cross-sectional view of the Dăroaia community. Source: Berescu (2019); used here with permission.

well connected to the main roads and no one is exposed to traffic hazards as in Dăroaia.

The issue of pollution is also different in the racialised peripheral and white central parts of RM. Dăroaia children and elderly are affected by the likely pollution of the ALS geochemical laboratory located next to the community (see Figure 1). Families residing on the ruins of the former ore processing plant experience direct toxicity and the risk of collapsing industrial infrastructures. RM at large used to be affected by explosions until 2006 when the mine was active, but since then the environment has become much safer.

Dăroaia has small, crowded houses unconnected to utilities and its residents have very limited legal options to improve their homes. RM has ample space for its houses, with most families enjoying courtyards, gardens and even meadows, in addition to houses and dependencies. Some residents engaged at some point in real estate ‘speculations’ by building wooden houses, which they hoped would be compensated by RMGC and create handsome profits (Alexandrescu 2020). When RMGC withdrew from RM, some of the *roșieni* developed tourist facilities, taking advantage of the ‘Roșia Montană’ brand. This became the ground for a residential racial capitalism (Walach and Kupka 2025), which allowed the gadjo to capitalise on their properties, while the Roma never even dreamt of such a right.

Finally, Dăroaia and RM offer strikingly different development opportunities. Dăroaia has been kept underdeveloped, secluded and closely associated with a landscape of industrial ruination (Hincks and Powell 2022). In contrast, RM has brighter development opportunities, being spared the brutal extractivism and free to develop its tourist potential as a UNESCO heritage site.

To conclude, the former mining community has historically been under imperial and colonial domination and, with the formation of the Romanian national state, the power relationships shifted and created an internal hierarchy between the ‘more

white’ gadjo and the less-than-white Roma. In RM, this delimitation has taken spatial forms, with a Roma quarter of dehumanised infrastructures, enclosing Roma families within a ‘prison without walls’ and a more prosperous central area dominated by gadjo Romanians. The latter have come to see their white privilege as normal and taken-for-granted. As shown above, the differences in recognising the humanity of Roma vs. gadjo are shaped through spatial forms. In the early 2000s, this fractured local space has become the stage of an environmental justice conflict in which the gadjo have been challenged to some extent by an extractive project but have protected their privileges, while the Roma remained neglected in a dehumanised space.

## 5 | Spotighting Dehumanisation on the Stage of Whiteness

When RMGC descended on Roșia Montană, it encountered a community that was already racially divided, as shown above. What RMGC did was to further entrench the principle of racial capitalism in creating human, material, infrastructural and symbolic differences (Pulido 2017) within RM. This entailed separating property owners (gadjo) from non-owners (mostly Roma); owners of land within the mining project footprint from those outside of it; owners of large properties from those of small ones. In the words of a Roma leader, the company was interested neither in Roma properties nor in their labour-power. While the Roma were left behind, under dehumanising spatial and social conditions, many gadjo from RM reproduced their privilege of being geographically and socially mobile based on the fact that their properties were generously compensated by the company (Alexandrescu 2013).

Paradoxically, the environmental justice struggle over RM (Alexandrescu 2020; Velicu 2020) has further magnified these differences through the activism of Alburnus Maior (AM—the first local organisation to oppose the RMGC project) and later of the Save Roșia Montană (SRM) campaign. SRM brought into the spotlight local, national and international organisations supporting AM. The whole anti-mining struggle in RM

left Dăroaia and its inhabitants in the shadows of dehumanisation: being highly aware of their superior status and negotiating power, the gadjo of RM fought for themselves while ignoring the interests and claims to development of their Roma fellow-neighbours.

Two spokespersons of AM stated in 2007 that this organisation is first and foremost one of 'property owners' (middle-aged female and male activists, RM). The English translation of the organisation's name is 'Goldminers' Association Alburnus Maior', which refers to the interwar mine-owners who were most likely gadjo. The heir of a mine owner explained in 2006 that the title-holders of mining rights were 'Austrians, French and Hungarians, but the majority were Romanian' (Popescu 2006), without any reference to Roma. As the struggle evolved over several decades (2000–2024), the principle of ownership was extended to include other types of property (houses, land, trees), all of them belonging to gadjo residents.

More exactly, several prominent leaders of AM were mining engineers but became farmers, and the association started drawing its symbolic power from land ownership: 'there are 750 *family farms* in this valley that *live by what the land brings* and their situation will deteriorate once resettled on new lands with low fertility and decreased water access' (Kalb 2006, 107, emphasis added). Those without land, such as the Roma, could not be a part of this land-based claim to environmental justice.

Both mines and land have inscribed the environmental struggle within the ambit of property ownership. As the Roma emerged from socialism property-less (neither as mine- nor as land-owners), they were seen as irrelevant for their inclusion in AM and its emancipatory struggles. This trend deepened as the conflict evolved, since AM and later the SRM campaign came to rely more and more on capitalising on the symbolic and cultural values associated with property (Pulido 2015).

After a two-decade struggle, the SRM movement was essentially successful: in a July 2021 decision, the former mining town was included on the UNESCO World Heritage list. The symbolic value of the area as a 'European mining landscape' performed a further insidious delimitation of whiteness. The nomination document submitted by the Romanian Government mentioned the historical contributions of Austrian, German, Hungarian and Romanian miners (Government of Romania 2016). Despite the role of Roma in the history of gold extraction in the area (Zsupos 1996), the UNESCO application document does not acknowledge their contribution. Moreover, the submission documents include a map that stops short of including the Roma community of Dăroaia<sup>3</sup> within the UNESCO area.

Another form of whiteness performed in the wake of the successful SRM movement was the campaign for mayoral elections (2024) of a young activist from RM. In a flyer designed for his potential voters, this independent politician portrayed his vision of Dăroaia as an improved and clean living-space, without challenging in any concrete way the historical segregation of this Roma neighbourhood. This is surprising, given that RM has become depopulated over more than two decades and the available space for alternative housing for Roma is not in short

supply. This stands in contrast to the increasing interest of well-to-do urbanites from Western Europe or Romania's developed cities to acquire status-lending properties in this UNESCO heritage site (middle-aged male activist, 2024). This is similar to Purifoy and Seamster's (2021, 62) observation of 'persistent patterns of Black underdevelopment combined with proximate white overdevelopment' related to the Black-founded town of Tamina, Texas. Through a digitally mediated tour of RM, local entrepreneurs seek to partake in the white technocapitalist development of this branded community (McElroy 2024), while the racialised Roma face the legacy of heavy industrial production.

The young candidate lost the 2024 election in favour of the incumbent mayor of RM, who has held this position since 2008. Under his leadership, the legal status of Dăroaia was kept purposefully blurred. The land along the small-gauge line crossing Dăroaia is owned by the Romanian railway. The residents inhabit the area with the full knowledge of the mayor, who acknowledged that the Roma reside in a state of 'legal illegality' (quoted in Ștef 2021). The mayor performatively suspends and reestablishes the rule of law (Roy 2005), which allows him to reiterate and reinforce an approach that insidiously dehumanises Roma while paying lip service to humanitarian discourse.

The aftermath of the 2021 floods highlighted another instance of dehumanisation. That event required the emergency relocation of several hundred people from Dăroaia to the 'community centre' of RM for a few days. Whiteness was suddenly confronted with the non-white 'other'. The *dur-rigate-dinipe* or 'organised apartness' of Dăroaia has been transformed into everyday apartness (Matache 2026), which challenged the taken-for-granted white privilege. The white residents set the Roma apart through racist speech, which transpired even in the mayor's discourse and actions: 'that is why I said that we could never civilise them' (mayor, RM, July 2021). He also referred to the Roma by proxy, using the racist statements of an imaginary neighbour, who has presumably 'said that if he catches a G\*psy in his yard, he would tie his legs and hang him upside down...'

The mayor reacted to the racist complaints of the majority against the Roma when they were in the 'community centre' of RM. Approximately 100 Roma had to share a communal space with only a handful of sanitation facilities. As this space was clearly inadequate to accommodate such a large number of families in crisis, the majority blamed the Roma that they were overcrowding and abusing the community space. Despite the availability of nearby empty properties, none was offered to lessen the pressure and provide more adequate living conditions.

Whiteness and dehumanisation often cropped up together in racist discourse. Unprompted statements against the Roma dotted our interviews with Romanian gadjo in 2024:

When do you say the G\*psy is a human being? When you see him from afar, you say: there is a man coming. And when they get close to you, you say "mother f\*\*\*\*\*, he is a ț\*gan [pejorative term for Roma]!"  
(Romanian man from RM centre, 2024)

This perception of Roma as being less than human is normalised to such an extent that our interviewee used this as a joke to ease the tension of his own drama, when recalling how he faced the pressures of RMGC. Whiteness recoiled into itself at the expense of dehumanising the other. Even a potentially sympathetic female Romanian respondent, who adopted two Roma children from Dăroaia, performed a dehumanising speech act against the Roma: ‘You cannot change those [from Dăroaia] who are 20 years old ... it is as if you would fight a bear’ (RM centre, 2024).

The dominion of whiteness, whether as action or discourse, is performed as a relentless dehumanisation of the Roma by all gadjo actors we interviewed. The racialised Roma of Dăroaia were not included in the *development* plans of RMGC but were also deemed irrelevant in the environmental *justice* struggle for gadjo rights of the SRM movement. Incumbent and would-be mayors did not consider challenging the whiteness line that had placed Dăroaia irremediably beyond the river and hence with no hope of legal recognition. The white *roșieni* themselves, even local charismatic figures of AM, have not shied away from using plainly racist language while proudly aligning themselves with European whiteness. All the gadjo actors vying for influence in the struggle have adopted the tropes of whiteness. The participants in the SRM have focused on the same stakes that RMGC has emphasised: property ownership (small or large owners), political clout (charismatic leaders), homophily (building alliances with white peers) and white European connectedness. One could pessimistically conclude that whiteness is so insidious and so powerful that it cannot be *undone*. However, as we will show in the next section, Roma agency is perhaps the best revelatory and grassroots political challenge against whiteness *tout court*.

## 6 | Unpacking Insidiousness: Roma Agency Challenging Whiteness

So far, we have problematised whiteness as forms of local and (trans-)national power. In this section, we take an alternative route that shows how the dehumanising consequences of whiteness are not lost on those who are made to suffer by it. On the contrary, the agency of different Roma actors, which we encountered in the field, has both revealed and challenged whiteness. In what follows, we outline a gradation of Roma agency, from personal perceptions to active interventions.

Our youngest interviewee in RM was a Roma teacher, trained at the University of Bucharest in Romani language, who returned to Dăroaia to teach the local children. His family was one of the oldest to live in Dăroaia; a close relative of his was the medical mediator for the community and another worked as school inspector. For him, racism is insidious but nevertheless plainly visible:

I made this point that *there is an invisible discrimination here*, so no one sees it, but it exists and it is at the limit of common sense. No one says it blatantly that you are this or that ... You feel it in other ways. For example, if someone speaks badly about

someone else, they will never do it in your face, you will hear it from others that one is g\*psy, and so and so ... One will never say it blatantly.

(Roma man, Dăroaia, July 2024, emphasis added)

This observation comes from a person who is professionally involved in emancipating the Roma children and youth of Dăroaia. Other Roma intellectuals whom we interviewed were also politically involved. One of them offered a subtle assessment of how whiteness operates, while describing an apparently objective legal process, that is, avoiding the completion of a geotechnical study by the local authorities, following the 2021 floods. At first, he made some technical observations about the need for an ‘expert analysis of how to consolidate the Western hill’ and also to ‘identify a space for relocating the entire [Dăroaia] community’, which would have challenged white privilege. He then added that ‘the authorities did absolutely nothing [other than] uploading [the bid for a technical expertise within the online national bidding system] for [only] 10 minutes and then removed it...’, only to formally demonstrate compliance with the law, but actually evading it. He then formulated what we interpret as a form of gadjiness as Roma exclusion: ‘the authorities want the Roma to voluntarily leave the community!’ (Roma middle-aged man, Dăroaia, 2024).

As a school mediator, this respondent participated in county council meetings and experienced silencing several times. The same happened to his brother who is an elected representative in the local council of RM. Following these experiences, both feel powerless in exposing the challenges facing the Roma from Dăroaia. In countering this feeling, the school mediator said he would reflect on these injustices in a book that he intends to write on the history of the Roma in this area.

It should not be seen as a surprise that Roma agency achieved its highest visibility and effectiveness under the leadership of a Roma woman from Dăroaia. She was the first to reconvert from an industrial job to being a teacher in the early 1990s and she subsequently promoted the professional and intellectual development of all the younger male leaders of the community. In the interview, she candidly admitted that she saw herself alone in the work of emancipating the community through education. After several years, she was joined in her emancipatory work by those whom she trained: ‘Here is my community and I want to have educated children around me. That’s why I didn’t leave and they (gadjo teachers) saw that we’ve never given up’. She had a distinctly determined stance on the power of education in challenging the whiteness line.

In 2013, one of the male leaders participated in an initiative to build a social enterprise for brick-making in RM, funded by the Soros foundation, to secure workplaces and reinvest the profit in the local community. The initial discussions with the mayor appeared promising for the Roma in that the mayor would contribute an industrial warehouse. Although the project reached an advanced stage, the mayor suddenly withdrew his support. In that same year, national-level funds were accessed by the same leader to open a day centre for the children from Dăroaia. After 8 months of operation, the mayor pulled the plug on this initiative too.

This same leader also proposed a collaboration with a cable factory from Arad (a large city in W. Romania) in 2020, which would have secured over 100 local workplaces. The local authorities blocked this initiative as well. A project to open a public bath in Dăroaia worked for a very short time and stopped without reason. All these show that the social exclusion endured by the Roma is neither a matter of fact, nor a wish to live like that, or a workshy attitude but rather the plain result of white exclusionary practices. In fact, a pattern became noticeable: every time Roma agency challenged the reproduction of the whiteness line, imposed through dehumanising spaces, white institutions often refused to act.

At other times, whiteness is discursively and administratively imposed, both by gadjo residents and by authorities. When one of the Roma leaders opened a store and fast-food outlet outside Dăroaia (2023), neighbouring business owners saw that as a dangerous trespass of their white turf. The authorities sought to discourage this form of Roma entrepreneurship by harassing the owner with daily administrative controls and fines.

Apart from these initiatives, the Roma leaders of Dăroaia have also participated in civil society organisations, both at local and regional levels. The political activism of these leaders has also borne fruit as one of them was elected in the local council, while another is active in European-level meetings and fora. During our fieldwork, we noticed a clear interest of these Roma leaders to better understand the context of their racial discrimination and build alliances to counter it. They recently issued a statement calling the government's austerity measures illegal and immoral 'given that the state has not ensured even basic infrastructures and public services' in Roma communities.<sup>4</sup> As much as whiteness is rooted in gadjo collective consciousness and regardless of how powerfully it is imposed, the agency of Roma in our analysis is neither an exception nor an accident. The fine-grained observation made by our youngest respondent at the start of this section shows that the insidiousness of whiteness is lived by the Roma in their daily life, but nevertheless prone to be challenged by a rising class of Roma.

## 7 | Conclusions

In this article, we have placed whiteness and its ramifying implications at the centre of our analysis. We have shown the dynamics of whiteness and its dehumanising forms across both spatial and discursive dimensions. There are virtually no similar attempts in the environmental justice literature on EE, but we consider whiteness as essential for shedding light on Roma environmental injustice and dehumanisation. The history of racial exploitation of the Roma since their arrival in Europe during the Middle Ages and continued until present-day capitalism has materialised whiteness through dehumanising spaces. In RM, the worthy and life-enabling infrastructures have been concentrated in the central, gadjo-dominated area of the community, while the dilapidated and life-disabling area has been formed as a spatial receptacle for the worthless non-white. Worse still, these have skewed resources and opportunities in favour of the gadjo over the long term, while stealing the chance to develop from the Roma and normalising their dehumanisation.

These spatial contrasts have pre-structured RM even before the conflict between RMGC and SRM unfolded. Based on our long-term case study of the internationally recognised and successful SRM movement, we have shown how both RMGC and SRM have had the privilege of performing their whiteness. Building on the differential valuation of gadjo and Roma humanity, the gulf between the clout of the property-owning gadjo and the property-less racialised Roma widened. Paradoxically, the very success of the SRM in safeguarding the rights and expectations of the *roşieni* has failed to sensitise the movement's leadership and its supporters in extending their claims for justice to their fellow Roma neighbours. While the SRM has *feared* an ecological disaster following the RMGC mine, the residents of Dăroaia have *actually suffered* continued socio-environmental injustices. Two struggles have taken place in RM: one more visible, which has received global attention and a panoply of allies, while the other much less visible and without allies. The visibility of the conflict has been reinforced by the race-blind academic research devoted to it. Even under these unfavourable circumstances, the agency of the Roma has constantly challenged the whiteness line and attempted to reclaim the humanity of the Roma.

We propose to reconsider and challenge the insidiousness of whiteness as a crucial task of Roma environmental justice research (see also Gheorghe et al. 2026). This involves several epistemological and methodological operations. First is 'bridging the distance' of the *dur-rigate-dinipe* (organised apartness), which limits the recognition of environmental struggles only to the most visible and articulate contestants. This is to be achieved by actively seeking who is silenced and kept at a distance beyond the whiteness line, even in apparently 'all-white' environmental conflicts. Bridging the distance means crossing the *river*, questioning the stereotypical *joke*, looking beyond the *wall (of silence)*, and 'see the other as they are' (Gheorghe 2010).

Second, challenging whiteness requires a creolisation of research positionalities, ensuring a transversality of academic, artistic or activist positions, alongside Roma, non-Roma and in-between stances. Our recent research experience has revealed that the challenge of whiteness is not the exclusive appanage of scholarly research. We have highlighted how local community members have their own desires and strategies for exposing the pains inflicted by the whiteness line. An expansion of the transversality that builds common ground from both sides—between academic and embodied knowledges—holds great promise for emancipatory research. Returning to our case in Roşia Montană, some old activists have once told us that the fight over the future of this community is far from over. We agree, but hasten to add: to be true to its progressive vision, the SRM or any other movement needs to broaden its calls for justice by demanding true equality for all.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available only in Romanian and can be obtained from the corresponding author upon request and subject to the project coordinator's approval.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4178732588869216&set=pcb.4178724322203376> (last accessed April 30, 2026).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100064851530620/posts/zone-no-go-in-mun%C8%9Bii-apuseni-india-made-in-romania-autorit%C4%83%C8%9Bile-%C3%AEnchid-ochii/852558113582565/> (last accessed April 30, 2026).

<sup>3</sup> The map available on the UNESCO Roșia Montană website includes a more restricted area. What is relevant for us, however, is how the Romanian government considered a wider area that stretched all the way to Dăroaia but omitted its inclusion.

<sup>4</sup> See the public statement of the Roma Association from Transylvania (Asociația Romilor din Ardeal “Le Devleța anglal” Alba) on Facebook, December 29, 2025: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/346710446787362/permalink/1459686538823075/?rdid=VYL05216Pdu5iZrg>.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Romanian translation of abstract.