

Understanding the persistent exclusion of Romanian Roma from environmental services

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Abstract

The goal of this research was to analyze and explain the mechanisms by which historical and institutional factors create and maintain disparities in access to environmental services in voluntarily and involuntarily settled Roma communities in Neamț County, specifically in the communes of Vânători-Neamț and Crăcăoani. The study consists of a literature review centered on urban political ecology, followed by interviews with Roma citizens, local governmental authorities, and the county water and sewerage company. The studied environmental services consisted of water and sewerage, electricity, and waste removal.

The data showed that disparities in access to environmental services among Roma communities in Neamț county stem from the intersection of historical exclusion, institutional limitations, and spatial marginalization. The study found that communities do not experience differential access to basic environmental services depending on their settlement history (voluntary or forced), as their informal status and marginal settlements place them outside mandatory service provision. Access to services was therefore largely dependent on local authorities' willingness to extend support beyond legal requirements. History shapes present situations through the continuous marginalization of the Roma in areas where lawful service provision is impossible due to their settlement in areas that were designated as flood-prone or protected after establishing their residence. The absence of land tenure forces residents into the impossibility of gaining access to services.

Roma residents perceive these disparities acutely, responding through strategies of self-provision, collaboration, or resistance, each of which further influences their relationships with local institutions and, in turn, their access to public services. The study highlights how environmental marginalization is produced through the intersection of space, governance, and ethnicity, contributing to broader debates within urban political ecology about inequality in accessing services. Ultimately, legal affirmative action, the formalization of institutions, and river-course changes are potential solutions to the lack of basic environmental service provision in marginal Romanian Roma communities.

Contents

Abstract	3
Table of Figures	6
Chapter 1. Introduction	7
1.1 Problem statement	7
1.2 Research objectives and questions	9
1.3 Thesis outline.....	11
Chapter 2. Literature Review.....	12
2.1 Introduction.....	12
2.2 Political ecology.....	13
2.3 A political ecology of service provision.....	17
2.4 Dimensions of analysis	20
2.4.1 Historical exclusion	20
2.4.2 Institutions	22
2.4.3 Local relations.....	24
2.5 Conclusion	26
Chapter 3. Methodology	26
3.1 Introduction.....	26
3.2 Case selection	27
3.3 Identification of key environmental services	28
3.4 Operationalization.....	31
3.5 Methods	32
3.6 Positionality and ethics	35
Chapter 4. Institutional and Legislative Structures of Marginalization	37
4.1 Introduction.....	37
4.2 History of land migration & allocation	38
4.3 Current legislation behind service provision.....	44
4.4 Service provision.....	46
4.5 Conclusion	52

Chapter 5. Lived Experiences.....	53
5.1 Introduction	53
5.2 Dependency on the state.....	54
5.3 Active exclusion	58
5.4 Responses aimed at the state.....	60
5.5 Social hierarchy	64
5.6 Conclusions.....	66
Chapter 6. Discussion	68
6.1 Introduction	68
6.2 Answering the sub-questions	68
6.3 Discussion by dimension of analysis	71
6.3.2 Historical exclusion and its legacy.....	71
6.3.3 Institutional dynamics and governance	72
6.3.4 Local relations and everyday interactions.....	75
6.4 Advancing the framework of urban political ecology.....	79
7. Conclusion and future developments	81
7.1 Overarching conclusion.....	81
7.2 Future developments	82
7.3 Practical recommendations	83
8. References	85
APPENDIX 1: Interview questions for the civilians	100
APPENDIX 2: Interview questions for the authorities	101
APPENDIX 3: Use of generative artificial intelligence	105

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Neamț county topographical map including the two studied locations (Vânători-Neamț and Crăcăoani). Source: (Andrein, 2010).....	27
Figure 2: Satellite view of Crăcăoani, highlighting the studied community. Source: Google Maps.....	40
Figure 3: Satellite view of Vânători-Neamț, highlighting the studied communities. Source: Google Maps.....	40
Figure 4: The land is at risk of flooding from the Cracău River	41
Figure 5: A 2013 flood severely affected the Roma community. Left: man showing the height of the water. Right: destroyed home and courtyard. source: Crăcăoani Town Hall, private archive	43
Figure 6: The administrative process behind securing access to utilities	46
Figure 7: The Cracău riverbank is littered with garbage and heavily polluted	50
Figure 8: Well built by the town hall in the Roma community.....	51
Figure 9: The non-functioning "water house" of Crăcăoani	51
Figure 10: The outdoor water pump of the bulibașă in the Vânători-Neamț "Cetate" community.....	57
Figure 11: Electricity meter in the Vânători-Neamț voluntarily settled community (left). Non-functioning utility pole in the same community (right)	59
Figure 12: Traditional cooking stove, as seen in the Crăcăoani "De pe deal" community ...	61
Figure 13: The Cracău riverbank is littered with garbage and heavily polluted	61
Figure 14: Outdoor water pump	63
Figure 15: The house of the majoritarian Romanian, having access to public utilities (far-right), and its proximity to the river	66
Figure 16: Sign cautioning against littering in the Vânători-Neamț forcibly settled community. Translation: "Promotion: Throw your garbage here, and you'll receive a fine at home. Cleanup carried out on 17.09.2022. Keep the area clean!"	77

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Problem statement

In Romania, Roma people are also called Rroma, Rromani, or Romani (Woodcock, 2007). However, more often than not, a more disturbing and historically charged term is used – *țigani* – even though the term “Roma” is rooted in history and is meant to showcase their identity beyond the context of enslavement (Gómez & End, 2019; „*Nu suntem țigani, ci romi*”. Dorin Cioabă, *apel către organizațiile minorității să nu facă alianțe cu extremiștii*, 2024). This word is derived from the Byzantine Greek *athínganos*, directly translating to “untouchable” (Herțanu, 2020). It is so widely used that many Roma identify with it, and the majority of Romanians do not understand why it can be considered hurtful (Antoniou, 2009; Cobășneanu, 2016; Gomag, n.d.; Kristiyana Official Music, 2023).

The current Romanian society is divisive and divided, especially towards its religious, ethnic, or cultural minorities (Mungiu-Pippidi & Poiana, 2010). However, both Roma and majoritarian Romanian citizens can benefit from more inclusive communities – along with a shared sense of belonging, cultural, educational, and financial exchanges can be facilitated more straightforwardly, and so it can be argued that desegregating Romania’s population would be desirable for the country as a whole (Frazer & Marlier, 2011).

The differential access to public services as experienced by the Roma in Western Moldavia constitutes the knowledge gap. The living situation of Roma people in the Romanian regions of Wallachia, Transylvania, and Dobruja, as well as the Republic of Moldavia, is covered through both national and international media pieces and scientific literature. However, the situation in the region of Western Moldavia seems to be widely unobserved and forgotten by the news and science, even though it contains an abundance of clustered Roma settlements (Costache, 2011).

Western Moldavia is important as it holds approximately 21% of Romania’s population while being one of the poorest regions in the European Union (*Moldova rămâne cea mai săracă regiune a țării. Ce alte zone sunt printre cele mai slab dezvoltate din Uniunea Europeană*, 2017), and therefore studying it helps explain rural poverty and economic disparities. Moreover, it

presents a unique background, blending a strong regional identity with shared histories with surrounding areas, such as the Republic of Moldova and other Romanian regions. This constitutes the motivation for this study, which seeks to research the previously undocumented inequality in access to environmental services in Western Moldavia. The county of Neamț was chosen as the study location – the case selection is further argued for in *Subsection 3.2: Case selection*.

Naturalized structural discrimination opened the way to environmental injustice, constituting a largely understudied phenomenon in Romanian Roma communities, particularly regarding disparities in access to environmental services. Moreover, an interesting (and currently understudied) distinction exists between voluntarily and involuntarily settled Roma communities, as national data collection often aggregates minority populations, obscuring intra-community differences.

The societal distinction based on the reason behind the settlement is inspired by Ogbu & Simons (2002) through a sociological parallel, a study distinguishing between voluntary or involuntary immigrants in the United States, namely, African-Americans (having a past of slavery) and African immigrants (who willingly moved to the United States). The paper argues that voluntary immigrants recognize themselves differently in society than involuntary immigrants, having experienced different patterns of oppression in the past. This is encapsulated in the term „community forces”, which encompasses historical oppression and the internalization of past experiences in contrasting ways. Through extrapolation, a similar distinction may exist between forcibly settled and voluntarily settled Roma, as their historical trajectories may shape present-day inequalities and social dynamics. Namely, community forces might drive norms and expectations, shaping internalization that affects others’ behaviour. Paralleling Ogbu & Simons (2002), forcibly settled Roma can be framed as involuntary minorities (having been denied agency in their settlement), while voluntarily settled Roma can be regarded as voluntary minorities.

There are national efforts to reduce marginalization and differences in access to services, starting with legislative measures (“Legislație națională,” n.d.) proposed and enforced by state authorities, such as the National Council for Combating Discrimination. Moreover, as Romania is

part of the European Union, the European Commission's non-discrimination laws apply (*Non-Discrimination*, n.d.). Regulation is supplemented by projects (Programul de Cooperare Elvețiano-Român, n.d.) and other small-scale efforts, such as brochures for promoting anti-discrimination through education created by various NGOs and associations (Mihăiescu *et al.*, 2018; Nan, 2023). However, societal segregation in living conditions cannot be remediated without sufficient social research and public information campaigns (Council of Europe, n.d.), which are currently lacking.

All in all, this study focuses on Roma communities in Neamț County, where both voluntarily and involuntarily settled groups coexist, allowing for comparison within the legal authority of a single county council, and it addresses the problem of unequal access to environmental services. While existing literature recognizes Roma marginalization, limited attention has been given to how settlement history shapes current service disparities, particularly in Western Moldavia. By comparing forced settlement with voluntary settlement, this research seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which settlement processes influence environmental inequality and the reasons behind public service exclusion despite legal provisions. To explore this problem, the following subsection presents the research objectives and questions formulated for this study.

1.2 Research objectives and questions

The problem statement presents the knowledge gap and the issue to be researched; in its continuation, the research objectives shall be provided. To begin with, the internal research objective (describing the scientific aim of the study) is *“to analyze and explain the mechanisms through which historical and institutional aspects create and maintain disparities in access to environmental services in voluntarily and involuntarily settled Roma communities in Neamț county”*. Next, the external research objective (naming the practical aim) is *“to provide insights that can help authorities and non-governmental actors in improving access to water, sewerage, electricity and waste disposal among Romanian Roma communities”*. These objectives, particularly the internal research objective, help formulate the research question that shapes

the identified knowledge gap into a clear, focused direction of study and serves as the guide for this thesis.

Building on this focus, the main research question is: *“How do institutional and legislative structures, past and present, shape inequalities in access to environmental services among Roma communities in Neamț county, and how are these inequalities experienced, interpreted, and contested locally?”*. This question allows tracing causality and continuity in access to environmental services in Roma communities, uncovering how historical land policies, administrative decisions, and current legislative frameworks have shaped their provision. Moreover, it captures the agency and perception of Roma people, investigating how Roma communities experience these institutional effects in daily life, interpret their relationship with the state, and respond through strategies of adaptation, resistance, or negotiation. To answer this broad main research question, it will be divided into two specific questions to capture both the authoritative and citizen perspectives.

The first emerging specific research question is *“How have historical and contemporary institutional and legislative structures shaped the current disparities in access to environmental services affecting Roma communities in Neamț county?”*. This will be addressed in *Chapter 4: Institutional and Legislative Structures of Marginalization*, tracing the history of land allocation and settlement, shaping Roma communities’ spatial and social positioning, and laying the groundwork for the current shortcomings in access to services. The legal framework surrounding access to services and tenure connects the past to the present, showing how marginalization is embedded within institutional and legislative systems.

Next, the second specific research question is *“How do Roma communities in Neamț county experience and respond to the institutional and social processes that affect access to environmental services?”*, which is answered in *Chapter 5: Lived Experiences*. This chapter presents the social hierarchies, forms of resistance and acceptance, and adaptive strategies within Roma communities, portraying service provision as a complex, continually redefined process.

The key constructs resulting from the main research question, “institutional and legislative structures”, “inequalities in access to environmental services”, “lived experiences of marginalization”, and “interpretation and contestation of inequality”, will be operationalized in *Chapter 3: Methodology*. Moreover, the answer to all the research questions, both the specific and the main, can be found in *Chapter 6.2: Answering the sub-questions* and *Chapter 7.1: Overarching conclusion*, respectively.

All in all, the research questions and key constructs inform the structure and flow of this thesis, linking inequality in access to services to community responses through the lens of history, dependency, legislation, and social relations.

1.3 Thesis outline

The main body of the thesis consists of seven chapters: an introduction, a theoretical chapter, a methodology section, two empirical chapters, a discussion, conclusions, and future developments. The thesis ends with *References*, followed by three annexes: *APPENDIX 1: Interview Questions for the Civilians*, *APPENDIX 2: Interview Questions for the Authorities* (detailing the specific questions used during fieldwork), and *APPENDIX 3: Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence*.

The first chapter, *Introduction*, stated the research topic, internal and external objectives, and research questions. *Chapter 2: Literature Review* introduces political ecology with a focus on urban environments, and three dimensions of analysis emerge for service provision: historical exclusion, institutions, and local relations. Next, *Chapter 3* explains the *Methodology* of this study by identifying and operationalizing key environmental services, justifying the case selection, and showcasing methods, positionality, and ethics. Next, the empirical analysis begins with *Chapter 4: Institutional and Legislative Structures of Marginalization*, which discusses the history of land migration and allocation, current legislation governing service provision, and service provision from the authorities’ perspective (showcasing how institutions’ willingness to improve access to services can affect service provision). The second empirical chapter, *Chapter 5: Lived Experiences*, showcases dependency

on the state, active exclusion, responses directed at the state, and social hierarchy through striking examples from fieldwork, offering the perspective of the interviewed Roma communities. *Chapter 6: Discussion* seeks to bridge Chapters 2, 4, and 5 by directly answering the research questions and analyzing the three theoretical dimensions, expanding the study's findings into remarks applicable to different case studies. The analysis concludes with *Chapter 7: Conclusion and future developments*, which summarizes the work and outlines avenues for further research and societal advances regarding the Romanian Roma population.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the scientific debates to which this thesis contributes, as well as the analytical dimensions used. For this, it draws on concepts such as political ecology and environmental justice, particularly concerning access to public environmental services. This will be done in three subchapters.

Firstly, political ecology, a framework that considers how politics, economics, and society affect environmental issues, shall be briefly introduced in section 2.2, *Political ecology*. The goal of political ecology, namely, politicizing urbanization and treating it as an interconnected process that creates and perpetuates inequality, is essential for effective, sustainable policy. A short history of the political ecological field is also given. This will be followed by a discussion of the complementarities and differences between environmental justice and political ecology (with a focus on urban environments).

Next, in 2.3 *A political ecology of service provision*, the existing literature on the politicized urban access to water and sewerage, electricity, and waste removal systems will be summarized, along with the importance of their accessibility in accordance with UN norms. Although the literature reviewed consists of case studies, its results and insights provide a wealth of information and a critical evaluation of existing scholarly resources.

The chapter continues with *2.4 Dimensions of analysis*, which describes the mechanisms of historical exclusion, the institutions involved, and the local relations in Romanian society. Here, historical exclusion and its effects on current service provision in the studied literature will be highlighted. Next, it discusses the institutions responsible for service provision, both in international contexts and specifically in Romania. The final subsection shows that, according to the capacities literature, access is conditioned not only by legislation and technological advances, but also, implicitly, by social ties (with the government and within communities), through complex webs of power and tenure arrangements.

A short summary of the chapter will be presented in the *2.5 Conclusions* section.

2.2 Political ecology

The term “political ecology” was coined in the 1970s, when influential figures such as A. Cockburn, E. Wolf, and G. Beakhurst used it as a thinking tool to understand access and control over resources under environmental disturbance and degradation, along with possibilities of sustainable alternatives (M. Watts, 2017). In a nutshell, according to Narain & Singh (2017) *“Political ecology is the study of the relationships between political, economic and social factors and environmental issues and alterations”* (p. 1), serving as a framework that politicizes environmental problems and phenomena (Holifield, 2015). The focus of this framework, human-environment relations, involves *“a focus on the respective roles and interactions of the state and the market and the influences on environmental outcomes”* and an analysis of the ways in which colonialism shaped current state, civil society, and market linkages, along with studying non-capitalist political systems (R. Neumann, 2014, p. 6).

Political ecology draws on and intersects with several other fields, such as political economy, marginalization, environmental marginalization and conflict, conservation, etc. (Robbins, 2019). In fact, Blaikie (1999) believes that *“much of the political ecology could, in an inclusive definition of the field, just as well be labelled environmental sociology, environmental anthropology, environmental economics, and the political science of the environment, and as*

such, is produced by a number of disciplines outside geography too” (p. 1). Political ecology has employed ethnography – a cross-cutting methodology that emphasizes lived experiences to explore environmental justice – to highlight the layers of interaction among actors (Gutierrez *et al.*, 2021; Little, 2007).

According to Robbins (1967), political ecology primarily concerns five theses: “*degradation and marginalization, conservation and control, environmental conflict and exclusion, environmental subjects and identity, and political objects and actors*” (p. 6). Radonic & Kelly-Richards (2015) call political ecology “*an intellectual tradition that seeks to dismantle dominant accounts of environmental issues, considering these portrayals as often conducive to unjust socio-environmental change*” (p. 2). This field is also seen as a repetitive, reflective solution-seeking process through increasing management transparency and showcasing the relevance and knowledge of non-traditionally powerful actors (Radonic & Kelly-Richards, 2015).

The broadness of political ecology also inspired more specific concepts, among which urban political ecology has become especially influential. In the context of cities, urban political ecology focuses on power, inequality, and environmental change in the urban realm. More precisely, in urban political ecology, urbanization is seen as an interconnected political, economic, social, and environmental process (Swyngedouw, 2006). This viewpoint is important as spheres of activity are traceable and tractable to reform (Robbins, 1967). Therefore, the general goal of urban political ecology has been to describe the power relations producing the “*current forms of urbanization, uneven urban spaces, and differentiated access to resources and services in cities.*” (N. L. Cornea *et al.*, 2017, p. 2). The built urban environment often creates and strengthens inequality, in which social groups experience costs and benefits differently (Cook & Swyngedouw, 2012; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). Finewood (2016) therefore considers the urban environment to be always political: “*instead acted upon and discursively maintained to serve particular interests, or produce particular outcomes*” (p. 4). Intrinsically, viewing urban environments as nature marks the difference between political and apolitical ecology, and seeks to internalize the cost of populations that are integral to the functioning of modern society (Robbins, 1967).

According to Gandy (2022), urban political ecology has been a continuously changing field, constantly broadening its definition and branching from neo-Marxian and feminist strands of political ecology from rural to urban settings and with an increased focus on the Global North (compared to being previously centered mainly on the Global South). Political ecology originated from the convergence of cultural ecology and community ecology, through their sharing of “*flows of matter, energy and information within integrated human environmental systems.*” (Walker, 2005, p. 2). Their non-overlapping aspects, namely, human resilience in ecological issues (in the case of cultural ecology) and systems theory (an important facet of community ecology), merged with hazard theory, biological ecology, and earth sciences, leading to the early roots of political ecology (R. P. Neumann, 2009; Walker, 2005; M. J. Watts, 2015). Cornea *et al.* (2017) summarize that urban political ecology has emerged from the broader field of political ecology to examine urban geography and power relations that result in unequal resource access.

Since unequal access to resources falls under the distributive justice facet of environmental justice, urban political ecology can be seen as directly linked to environmental justice (Svarstard, 2011). This theoretical framework connects people to the injustice they experience while accessing environmental services (Bullard, 1994). Environmental justice is similar to political ecology in that it represents a pluralistic, critical approach to socio-environmental situations, backed by the motivation to reveal sustainable solutions (Ranganathan & Balazs, 2015; Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2020). However, environmental justice and political ecology are topics having different origins and different areas of focus: environmental justice is disproportionately concerned with the impact of environmental hazards on human health in the US, while political ecology is a framework for the analysis and understanding of politicized human environments and internalized socio-economic factors leading to living differences (Holifield, 2015). In the interest of providing insight into the struggles in the lives of Romanian Roma, a brief description of environmental justice follows, as it exemplifies the political ecology framework.

The concept of environmental justice emerged in the United States in the 1980s as a way of framing the injustice patterns and trends that disproportionately exposed minority and low-income communities to toxic hazards (Mascarenhas, 2021). A facet of environmental justice, environmental racism, can be quantified through disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards, inequitable distribution of environmental benefits, exclusion from environmental decision making, economic disparities and exploitation, health impacts and disparities, and a historical legacy of racism (Kaufman & Hajat, 2021). While environmental racism can be defined in different ways, according to the situation it is seeking to analyze, Chavis (1987) categorized it using five facets:

“racial discrimination in defining environmental policies, discriminatory enforcement of regulations and laws, deliberate targeting of minority communities as hazardous waste dumping sites, official sanctioning of dangerous pollutants in minority communities, and the exclusion of people of color from environmental leadership positions”.

However, the models by Chavis (1987) and Kaufman & Hajat (2021) were developed in an American context, and studies examining their use in other parts of the world have been few and far between. Therefore, there is a knowledge gap regarding marginalized Eastern European populations, such as the Romanian Roma in Western Moldavia. As different populations require context-specific approaches, the aforementioned facets were framed considering historical and socio-political aspects against a study by Breakey *et al.* (2024), inspiring this research’s focus on the inequitable distribution of environmental benefits and the historical legacy of marginalization. This is why political ecology was chosen as a suitable lens, as it complements environmental justice by enabling a more contextualized analysis of the lived realities of marginalized groups beyond the North American setting.

All in all, the provision of basic public environmental services such as water, sewerage services, sanitation, and waste removal can be understood through the frameworks of urban political ecology, political ecology, and environmental justice. Political ecology generally emphasizes how power, history, and social relations shape access to and control over

environmental resources. In contrast, urban political ecology focuses on these relations in an urban context, treating the city as an environment in its own right. The framework of environmental justice serves as a lens that highlights fairness and equity in the distribution of public services. Narrowing the literature review to the thesis's focus, the following subsection examines how service provision can be conceptualized within the framework of urban political ecology, thereby addressing a current gap in understanding the politics of service provision.

2.3 A political ecology of service provision

Regarding service provision as influenced by capital circulation, and witnessing the transformation of nature through development, are central themes in urban political ecology (Silver, 2015). Public environmental service provisioning systems are essential according to UN norms: the UN General Assembly recognizes the human right to water and sanitation, and Sustainable Development Goals aim to ensure access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy for all (*The 17 Goals | Sustainable Development*, n.d.; UN. General Assembly (64th sess. : 2009-2010), 3). This subchapter will present case studies of urban water and sewage, electricity, and waste systems around the world, describing the key dynamics behind access to services.

Historically, the field of urban political ecology has mostly focused on large infrastructure networks, especially involving water (Swyngedouw, n.d.; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). In fact, even the term Urban Political Ecology was coined in relation to urbanizing water systems, by Eric Swyngedouw (1996) in his paper *“The city as hybrid: on nature, society, and cyborg urbanization”* (N. Cornea, 2019). Therefore, from an urban political ecology perspective, water systems are seen as *“part and parcel of the political economy of power that gives structure and coherence to the urban fabric”*, and their research has been central to the development of the field (Loftus, 2007; Swyngedouw, n.d., p. 1). Studies found that informal water provisioning can be used as either a discipline or an inclusion tool towards marginal populations, further proving the inequality in urban environments (Kelly-Richards & Banister, 2017; Meehan, 2013).

Radonic & Kelly-Richards (2015) explore water provisioning systems in two marginal, rapidly urbanizing cities in Sonora, Mexico (predominantly inhabited by indigenous citizens), using ethnographic methods. During this study, the importance of recognizing informal infrastructure and quantifying responses to resource scarcity and maintenance deficiencies became apparent, underscoring the need to keep different categories of people at the forefront of research. Austin (2004) further argues that knowledge of purely legislative and technological aspects is largely incomplete without collaborative community research and the exploration of the social mechanisms involved. Informal water provisioning is important and often more functional than formal alternatives and must not, therefore, be regarded simply as a patch solution (Radonic & Kelly-Richards, 2015). Finally, Radonic & Kelly-Richards (2015) argue that homogeneity is an unrealistic goal to pursue through policy, as *“urban realities are contextually based – topography, ecology, history, economic development, and other processes of social differentiation shape infrastructure solutions. Urban planning must account for context and history in order to arrive at viable and pragmatic infrastructural solutions”* (p. 17).

However, an important and often overlooked counterpart of drinking water systems is constituted by wastewater removal systems, necessary to close the production and consumption loop (Karpouzoglou & Zimmer, 2016). Without treating wastewater, achieving the 6th Sustainable Development Goal, *“Clean water and sanitation”*, is impossible, being regarded as an integral part of the water provisioning systems, the *“waterscape”* (Obaideen *et al.*, 2022; Swyngedouw, n.d.). The study of Karpouzoglou & Zimmer (2016) found that knowledge generated by the informal settlement residents is often dismissed by local authorities and labeled as uncooperative or uneducated. National networks in the form of one-size-fits-all solutions often do not align with the realities of marginal locations, clashing with the local knowledge of people struggling with wastewater management. Finally, the study argues that wastewater management is not simply a technical issue, but rather a deeply political process tied to class, citizenship, and inequality. Uneven waterscapes are often a result of interactions between societal actors, being tightly tied to power relations (Zimmer, 2015).

However, solutions are not straightforward. A complementary view of water systems is provided by Finewood (2016) through his study regarding gray and green infrastructure

approaches in Pittsburgh, USA. He argues that green solutions to complex urban environmental problems are tempting, but they are framed and further politicized by grey approaches. In some instances, *"alternative and creative forms of greening the city may not necessarily represent a more democratic process, but instead reproduce uneven urban landscapes under greener cover"* (Finewood, 2016, p. 2). For example, standard wastewater practices such as pipes and sewers are tried-and-true methods for quickly treating wastewater, so there is no explicit need to modify working solutions, as the same result is often achieved anyway (Boelens *et al.*, 2015).

In the field of urban political ecology, the electricity networks of cities are a well-researched subject (typically through socio-technical transitions approaches), as they are central to shaping urbanization processes (Jaglin, 2014). This is illustrated by Silver (2015), who examines the socio-natural processes that lead to power outages in Accra, Ghana, and shows the importance of historical and socio-political geographies (in addition to the more obvious technical factors) in securing and maintaining access to electricity. This unequal geography, built by decades of social inequalities, leads to a *"fragmented, splintered infrastructure that reinforces urban inequalities."* (Silver, 2015, p. 1). Moreover, the social action of several groups is considered, politicizing the power relationship between different income classes and their subsequent ability to overcome disruption through access to various forms of technology. Therefore, access to services becomes an entity *"produced directly through the urbanization of nature"* (Silver, 2015, p. 3). Finally, the article argues that the differential responses to electrical disruption in Accra are one of the contributing factors towards urban poverty.

The final environmental service discussed in this chapter is waste removal, an often-overlooked but vital public environmental service. A study in Cape Town, South Africa, by McFarlane & Silver (2017) examined the politicization of sanitation services in marginal and informal settlements, arguing that the political dimension of this convoluted problem stems from decades of history and the city's constant evolution. In an environment plagued by racial tensions and social segregation, the urban space itself reflects how social structures affect formal institutions (Swanson, 1977). This is not unique to South African history; instead, it reflects the reality of many marginalized, segregated societies (McFarlane, 2008). The paper

argues that, in a sense, solving the waste removal crisis translates into truly egalitarian, post-racialized societies. However, the waste removal issue is an intricate problem, as it involves *“sanitation, or resource distribution, or cultural politics around gender inequalities, or everyday habits, or political will and capacity, and so on—and this is before we get to the specificity of location”* (McFarlane & Silver, 2017, p. 4). The citizens of Cape Town have a range of responses to the lacking waste removal system, acting through radical, shocking displays towards the upper classes (what the paper calls “spectacle”), interacting with the state in a bureaucratic manner (“auditing”), destroying provided infrastructure as a way of protest (“sabotage”), and externalizing responsibility (“blockage”). The paper ends by noting that the complex issue of sanitation cannot be solved simply with funds. A South African official mentioned, for a study, *“If you give me a billion rand now I can't service informal settlements, there are other issues. Space, density, community, land ownership. It is not about toilets in my opinion. The question is how we are going to deal with it in relation to other constraints?”* (McFarlane & Silver, 2017, p. 15).

In this chapter, we have seen that service provision issues are problems that go beyond technicality, being intertwined with social class, governance, and politics. Since these dimensions are vital for understanding how access to and control over services are shaped, there is a history of observing these topics through the lens of urban political ecology. Ultimately, control of services also implies control over both people and their environments. The next chapter will be primarily based on the literature to date, seeking to condense the explored scientific content into what matters for the case at hand. It will argue that historical exclusion, institutions, and local relations are essential dimensions for understanding the lives of Romanian Roma and their experiences with access to environmental services.

2.4 Dimensions of analysis

2.4.1 Historical exclusion

One of the key dimensions emerging from the aforementioned literature is the cumulative processes of exclusion that unfold over time, with intricate consequences that resonate in service

provision. Therefore, a central theme in urban political ecology is historical exclusion, a concept that links current situations to past processes. Its importance lies in facilitating understanding of why specific mechanisms occur today, and disregarding it could lead to overlooking the broader picture of marginalization as a complex, iterative, and repetitive process with long-lasting consequences. This subchapter examines how environmental service provision (and its exclusion) emerged from sociopolitical histories.

As we have previously explored in *Chapter 2.2 Political ecology*, environmental justice is a concept tightly tied to addressing the undesirable consequences of historical processes of marginalization. Bullard (2001) mentioned that the 5th facet of environmental justice is to “*redress disproportionate impact through ‘targeted’ action and resources*” (p. 5), making the exploration of histories a central theme in frameworks dealing with justice and power. This translates to corrective justice, which demands “*fairness in the way punishments for lawbreaking are assigned and damages inflicted on individuals and communities are addressed... and involves not only the just administration of punishment to those who break the law, but also a duty to repair the losses for which one is responsible.*” (Kuehn, 2004, p. 14). By extension, historical exclusion is also a key theme in urban political ecology, a field shaped by postcolonial urban studies, and therefore in which history is of central importance (Robin & Broto, 2021).

Historical exclusion is a recurring dimension identified in the literature reviewed for this study. It is not unusual for city planning to be enmeshed with the history of persistently unequal infrastructure provision, thereby perpetuating marginality (Karpouzoglou & Zimmer, 2016; Mann, 2007). In describing drinking water systems, Radonic & Kelly-Richards (2015) highlight the importance of history and processes of social differentiation in shaping infrastructure. However, a reverse relationship in which infrastructure induces and exacerbates marginalization is also applicable: “*the colonial policy of subjugation and punishment of Delhi was reflected by means of the water supply and sewerage system*” (Mann, 2007, p. 11). Next, describing electricity provision in Accra, Silver (2015) blames “*the historical development of the electricity network within and beyond Accra, which has resulted in a fragmented, splintered infrastructure that reinforces urban inequalities*” (p. 1) for the frequency of disruptions, highlighting the importance of history in access to services. Finally, in their politicized analysis

of waste removal in Cape Town, McFarlane & Silver (2017) point out that the early settler-colonial period continues to influence post-apartheid-built infrastructure, particularly through the fragmentation of the population and the subsequent marginalization of specific social segments. The article also notes that responses from marginalized groups regarding poor public service provision can be better understood through a lens of historical tension.

This subsection showcased that considering historical exclusion is essential to understanding the current patterns of fragmentation in service provision. It is not only a force of the past (an active dimension in perpetuating marginalization), as a lack of infrastructure can reinforce social exclusion even in the present. Building on this understanding, the following subsection will explore the relevant institutions involved in environmental service provisioning.

2.4.2 Institutions

Another key concept emerging from the literature review is that public institutions and their relations with the population play a central role in access to environmental services. The complex network of public and private actors, driven by different motivations and preconceptions, must be studied to understand the prerequisites for securing and maintaining access. Therefore, this chapter will examine the relationship between governmental authorities and private service providers, as reflected in their historical arrangements and operational scales. Moreover, the intricacies of bureaucracy and procedures that affect service provision (according to the explored literature) shall be briefly described.

Water infrastructure can be built and managed by governmental authorities, private actors, or a combination of both. In Jakarta, small vendors ensure water provision (through informal arrangements) where authorities do not (Kooy, 2014). This is not unique; it is a common occurrence, especially in developing countries, and often any non-state-owned provider is considered informal (Karpouzoglou *et al.*, 2023). In their article, Karpouzoglou *et al.* (2023) argue that the interface between formality and informality is a space in which power, governance, and social relations are negotiated, and that public and private actors depend on each other to provide water to marginalized communities. The authors also note that informal

arrangements can be formalized by verifying the legal and safety conditions of the private system.

As previously mentioned, electricity networks are part of politicized urban geographies and involve a wide range of actors (Silver, 2015). Silver (2015) discusses the actors involved in energy governance in Accra, namely, “*national and local policymakers, utility-company representatives, built-environment professionals, civil-society actors and others*” (p. 4), including financial actors and international institutions such as the World Bank. This long list proves the interconnectedness of the electrical network with the fiber of the entire society.

The literature suggests that there are political dimensions behind waste removal service provision, and communication between the relevant institutions is essential. For example, as previously mentioned, McFarlane & Silver (2017) noted that waste removal systems are unequally distributed across the population, with the poorest and marginal populations often excluded from governmental services. Their study highlights the crucial role of activists and NGOs in raising awareness about these living conditions. It stresses the importance of accessible channels of communication between local authorities and affected communities.

However, institutions often struggle to deliver the promised level of service access because discrepancies exist between the conditions stipulated by law and real-life situations. Ribot & Peluso (2003) note that legislation alone cannot explain the complexity of access, as it does not account for overlapping webs of power and is often ambiguous. Previous research also emphasizes that laws are simply the mechanisms defining who has the right to control and maintain access, and access to public services can be affected by bureaucracy (or parallel approaches) and the informalization of provision (Compton & Meier, 2017; Karpouzoglou *et al.*, 2023; Von Benda-Beckmann, 1981).

All in all, this subsection explored the relevant institutions involved in environmental service provision, both in the studied literature and in Romania. Building on it, the next subsection will describe local relations of access and interaction between institutions and the public.

2.4.3 Local relations

The framework of urban political ecology connects the histories of exclusion to institutions through the dimension of local relations. This concept emerged from the literature review to further explain the politics of service access and tenure. Therefore, this chapter will define access to services through social tie theory, explore the importance of maintenance, detail the social relations of access with governments and within communities, and discuss how tenure is an important typology of access.

Local relations are essential, as according to capacities literature (particularly institutional capacities), even though access is an individual process, social ties and networks are recognized as central to understanding connections to public services (Finsveen & van Oorschot, 2008). Two dimensions of local relations can be highlighted: with the government and within communities. Local authorities, NGOs, and support networks link access to the all-encompassing social and political dynamics, facilitating or hindering the obtaining of services (van Wessel & *et al.*, 2019). The base mechanism explaining interpersonal relationships and their effect on access to services is social tie theory, proving especially relevant in contexts with prevalent bureaucratic inefficiencies, resource scarcity, or corruption, such as that of the Romanian Roma (Harris *et al.*, 2020; Mehrpour *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, networks and social ties can be explored as an indicator of how access is secured or maintained.

Supporting this view, Ribot & Peluso (2003) define access as “*the ability to derive benefits from things*” rather than simply regarding it as the presence of rights (as the right to access a resource does not directly imply that access is possible). In their work, it is further seen as “*a bundle of powers*”, implying that access is surrounded and influenced by a wider range of existing social relationships. Describing access as embedded in dynamic processes and relationships enables us to recognize the various cultural, political, and economic mechanisms that influence people’s ability to benefit from resources. Two facets are worth delving into: access control (“*the ability to mediate others’ access*”) and its maintenance (translating to the resources needed to keep the resource accessible). The paper succinctly notes the disparity in securing and maintaining access: “Some people and institutions control resource access while others must

maintain their access through those who have control.” Blaikie (1995) further details the factors influencing resource access priority, namely capital and social identity.

Access is a broad term encompassing the way society interacts with legislation and governmental authorities. In that light, Ribot & Peluso (2003) distinguish between different aspects of access: to technology, wealth, markets, labor, knowledge, authority, social identity, and negotiation of other social relations. Most of these are relevant to this study, except for access to markets (as there are no resource markets involved) and labor (as the research question does not concern the employment status of Romanian Roma). These facets of access shall be further discussed in *Chapter 6: Discussion*.

However, access to public services is often conditioned by having legal access to use and control land. According to FAO, “*access to land is governed through land tenure systems*” (*What Is Access to Land*, n.d.). Proof of legal property typically involves holding titles, deeds, permits, and other licenses (Bell & Parchomovsky, 2004). Tenure involves the arrangements, both formal and informal, through which individuals or groups gain, hold, and transfer rights to land and resources (Payne, 2004). However, property can also be regarded as the addition of rights and duties needed to sustain access maintenance (Meinzen-Dick, n.d.). These rights and duties can be seen as part of the aforementioned webs of power, in that they shape the way benefits are gained, controlled, and maintained through “*technology, capital, markets, labor, knowledge, authority, identities, and social relations*” (Ribot & Peluso, 2003). Therefore, access to land (and, by extension, tenure) is just as important to consider as access to environmental services itself and can be regarded under the dimension of local relations.

In conclusion, access to services is influenced by local relations and tenure relationships. The capacity literature mentions that connections with the government and within communities can be explained by social tie theory. The next subsection will underline this whole chapter’s conclusions.

2.5 Conclusion

This literature review chapter has reviewed the framework of political ecology, focusing on urban settings. It has been seen that environmental justice constitutes a valuable branch of urban political ecology and that this analytical lens is helpful in investigating access to public environmental services in marginal locations. Literature on urban access to water, sewerage, electricity, and waste removal systems was summarized, from which three dimensions of analysis emerged: historical exclusion, institutions, and local relations. Together, these aspects weave an interconnected web that explains and perpetuates the lack of infrastructure for provision.

The next chapter will detail how these dimensions were operationalized, the data-gathering and analysis, and the reasoning behind choosing this case study.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter shall detail how data were gathered and analyzed, and expand on how the three dimensions of analysis mentioned in *Chapter 2.4* complement each other, and on the selection of relevant theories.

3.2 Case Selection explains why the communities of Vânători-Neamț and Crăcăoani were chosen as case studies, along with explaining the reason behind the decomposition of environmental services into water and sewerage, electricity, and waste removal. Next, *3.3 Identification of key environmental services* shall briefly introduce the relevant theories underpinning this research and categorize the study as a longitudinal cross-sectional retrospective cohort case study. *3.4 Operationalization* describes how the three dimensions derived from the urban political ecology literature can be used to measure access to environmental services and understand the case study. The chapter continues with *3.5 Methods*, in which the research and observational populations are introduced, and the software and methods behind data gathering and analysis are detailed, along with a statement on consent and

data management. The section will end with a positionality statement and an overview of the ethical considerations in *3.6 Positionality and ethics*.

3.2 Case selection

My native county of Neamț was chosen as the study area after careful discussions with national social justice NGOs, as it houses a large Roma population primarily living in marginal areas and was deemed to provide the easiest access into Roma communities in Western Moldavia. The county map can be seen in *Figure 1* below. In this figure, the yellow dots indicate the studied communities (2 in Vânători-Neamț and 1 in Crăcăoani, as explained in the next paragraph).

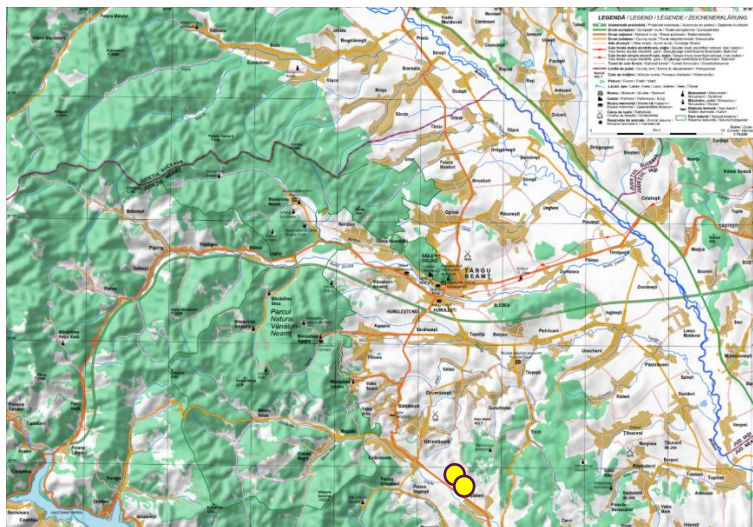


Figure 1: Neamț county topographical map including the two studied locations (Vânători-Neamț and Crăcăoani). Source: (Andrein, 2010)

Vânători-Neamț was selected as one of the locations for this case study because the Roma community there is open to external communication, having been repeatedly interviewed previously, and the area has a rich history of both forced and voluntary settlement. The commune of Crăcăoani, a commune named after the Cracău river, was chosen due to its providing a welcome contrast to Vânători-Neamț, as the entirety of its Roma population is voluntarily settled (Frăsinel & Verdeș, 1999; Crăcăoani town hall, personal communication, December 16, 2024). Moreover, a key contact (a sanitary mediator employed by the Romanian Ministry of Health who dedicates a significant portion of her professional life to ensuring overall safety and access to

services in Roma communities across Western Moldavia) resides in Crăcăoani and volunteered to help facilitate interviews with elderly Roma women from the community. As seen in Figure 1, both communes are in geographically complex areas bordering mountains and rivers.

The following subsection outlines the data collection and analysis methods employed in this study, providing details on the research and operational populations, as well as considerations regarding consent and data management.

3.3 Identification of key environmental services

First, the study will be classified by design and analytical approach, highlighting how it combines case study, comparative, longitudinal, cross-sectional, retrospective, and cohort elements to examine environmental service access in Roma communities. To begin with, it is a case study, focusing on the main Roma communities in Vânători-Neamț and Crăcăoani. Moreover, the study is a comparative research study that surveys three communities in Western Moldavia, identifying similarities and differences in the history of access to environmental services, and it is longitudinal, as it concerns only these three communities across time. The cross-sectional and retrospective character is described by the historical snapshots experienced by the communities. For example, the predominantly Roma community in Vânători-Neamț was forcibly formed during the communist regime. So, 1989 (the fall of the Romanian communist regime) was selected as the study's historical start, although the study's timeline continues to the present. Finally, the present thesis is also a cohort study, as the three interviewed communities belong to the same cohort (forcibly vs. voluntarily settled Roma).

The referenced literature has been sourced from diverse sources and spans a wide array of media, from journal and newspaper articles to short YouTube documentaries. The literature review was inspired by Natasha Lee Cornea's annotated bibliography (N. Cornea, 2019). Scientific articles and other relevant media were found using Google, the Google Scholar engine, and Wageningen University's Library search website. The searches were performed in both English and Romanian, using terms such as "political ecology", "urban political ecology", "environmental

service provision”, “public access to services”, “Roma voluntary settlement”, “Roma forced settlement”, “Western Moldavia Roma”, “Romanian land tenure”, etc.

To interpret the gathered data using the political ecology framework, the analytical lenses of *Historical Exclusion*, *Institutions*, and *Local Relations* were chosen. They relate through their layered character: while *Historical Exclusion* yields a much-needed long-term structural context, *Institutions* explain the rules and governance mechanisms that shape opportunities, and *Local relations* reveal the lived, day-to-day realities. Together, they interlink the historical past with current formal structures and with actual, lived realities. These methodologies complement each other, providing structure and understanding to the empirical data gathered.

The scope of the study is limited to interviewing adult Roma people living in Western Moldavia who have either a forcibly or voluntarily settled familial history. To isolate confounding factors, the study considers only the primary cause of settlement. This selection aims to compare whether the reason behind settlement may shape present-day living conditions for the residents, as explored through an urban political ecology lens, describing disparities in access to resources.

The supply component of environmental services was divided into electricity, water and sewerage, and waste removal. This categorization was done after a brief literature review process consisting of previous studies regarding the lives of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, along with overall quality of life indicators (Gyourko *et al.*, 1999; Marans, 2003; van Kamp *et al.*, 2003). Several studies on the living and societal conditions of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe informed the selection of the primary environmental services examined in this study. For example, Filčák (2007) identified “*four patterns of the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and harm*”: “1) exposure to hazardous waste and chemicals (settlements at contaminated sites); 2) vulnerability to floods; 3) differentiated access to potable water; and 4) discriminatory waste management practices”. Further inspiration for the constructs (along with an insight into the environmental realities of European Roma) was taken from three other reports that showcased similar discussions (Harper *et al.*, 2009; Heidegger & Wiese, 2020; Making the Case for Environmental Justice in Central and Eastern Europe, 2007).

Access to electricity, clean water, sewerage systems, and waste removal is essential. To begin with, access to electricity is considered a fundamental human right and constitutes an indicator with apparent consequences on overall health (Irwin *et al.*, 2020; Tully, 2006).

Access to clean water is also considered one of the critical indicators for overall quality of life, having a strong correlation with overall health (A Persisting Concern, 2018; LED Pumps (Pty) Ltd, 2024). Moreover, having no access to running water reduces the adoption of sanitation and hygiene practices to prevent disease, infections, and health threats (*Water Quality and Quantity Are Key for Well-Being*, 2023).

Sewerage systems are an essential component of water infrastructure. Having a toilet in the dwelling was deemed essential by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, and is considered an indicator for quality of life related to sanitation (A Persisting Concern, 2018; Akter *et al.*, 2024). Meanwhile, a lack of a bathroom in the dwelling has been named an “element of deprivation” in living situations and linked to poor overall health in previous studies (Molinuevo *et al.*, 2012). Having a bathroom is deemed essential by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (A Persisting Concern, 2018), having direct influence on the cleanliness and comfort of citizens.

Finally, waste management needs to be inquired as, outside the obvious physical and olfactory inconvenience of having piles of waste close to frequented places (such as homes, schools, parks, etc.), improper waste management also leads to air pollution and water contamination (“A Review of Waste Management Practices and Their Impact on Human Health,” 2009). This can further lead to diseases and an overall decrease in sanitation. Sewage treatment is important, as it improves the overall quality of life, health, and environment (Water & ctwadmin, 2017).

The next section shall describe how historical exclusion, institutions, and public relations helped determine access to services among Romanian Roma populations.

3.4 Operationalization

In this subchapter, the operationalization of the three dimensions of analysis discussed in *Chapter 2*, along with their role in explaining access to public environmental services in Romanian Roma populations, shall be explained. To understand the case at hand, these three dimensions serve as analytical lenses that structure comparisons between voluntarily and involuntarily settled communities and help explain access to public services. Applying them to the topics of the two empirical chapters, they allow both a descriptive account of service provision and a critical interpretation of the mechanisms that enable or constrain access. These three dimensions are operationalized through a set of indicators and questions that link the broader conceptual framework to the empirical chapters (*Chapter 4: Institutional and Legislative Structures of Marginalization* and *Chapter 5: Lived Experiences*), ensuring that access is examined both in terms of infrastructural provision and the socio-political context that surrounds it.

To begin with, *Chapter 2* argued that the unsatisfactory or absent provision of public environmental services can be understood through the lens of historical exclusion in the case of marginal communities. This also applies to the Romanian Roma, as they have been a persistently marginalized population, experiencing centuries of persecution. Thus, the relevant historical context shall be applied in the analysis to understand the delivery of services through the long-term patterns of settlement, land allocation, and administrative exclusion, neglect that continue to shape infrastructural inequalities today.

Similarly, as discussed in *Chapter 2*, considering the relevant stakeholders' (and therefore institutions') influence is central to understanding access to public environmental services, as they shape law and its implementation. In the case of the Romanian Roma, the analysis shall therefore account for how national and local (county- and town-level) institutions, through their policies, practices, and resource allocation, influence the provision and maintenance of such services. These will be seen as either reinforcing or mitigating existing inequalities, thereby expressing the authorities' willingness to counter marginalization.

Additionally, the social relations between the Roma and the authorities influence access to public environmental services. Everyday interactions and patterned social dynamics (and therefore relations of trust, cooperation, or conflict) influence the extent to which services are delivered, maintained, or obstructed for marginalized communities. Therefore, the analysis will examine how responses from the population towards the state, social hierarchy, and the legal classification of marginalized communities facilitate or constrain access to water, sanitation, and safety infrastructure.

Chapter 4 mainly deals with the history of Roma marginalization, as well as the social relations between the Roma and the state under the law (through the formalities of settlement). The institutions involved in service provision are also named, and their perspective is showcased in the same chapter. On the other hand, *Chapter 5* details social relations, showcasing broader societal trends and how they affect provision from the Roma's perspective.

The next chapter will provide insight into the study's structure, data analysis techniques, and data management considerations.

3.5 Methods

Considering the relevant population is essential for a good comparative design, and therefore, both Roma communities were studied using similar data collection methods. For both Vânători-Neamț and Crăcăoani, the main community members interviewed were *bulibașă*¹. Due to the social hierarchy in traditional Roma communities, they are both considered the most knowledgeable within their communities and tend to be the most open. By gaining the trust of a *bulibașă*, one can communicate more easily with other members of the community, allowing the researcher to gain a closer insight into the community.

The research and observational populations are as follows:

¹ Male leader of a group of Roma. Source: (*Dexonline*, n.d.)

Theoretical research population: communities in Western Moldavia (forcibly or voluntarily settled);

Operational research population: communities in Western Moldavia as documented in official (county council) registers;

Observational units: *bulibași* and other residents who have been living there since the inception of the community;

Research unit: one community (forcibly or voluntarily settled).

Overall, the research spanned 13 months, from September 2024 to October 2025. The main part of the study included 2 weeks of fieldwork in Western Moldavia (in the first half of December 2024), yielding observations and unstructured interviews with the Roma population, social justice NGOs, and relevant authorities (such as public health institutions, water management services, town halls, and the county prefecture). The raw data consisted of a mix of field notes, pictures, interview notes, and recordings.

The central part of the fieldwork consisted of interviews with Roma communities and relevant local institutions. Only conversations with people were audio-recorded using Google Pixel's native Recorder app, while discussions with the authorities were preserved only in interview notes due to privacy regulations. The interviews within the communities were conducted either individually or in focus groups, with the help of a sanitary mediator (a Roma person trusted by the community). During fieldwork, a significant amount of time was spent at the sanitary mediator's home, as she became my host family for that period. The purpose of this home stay was to encourage conversations regarding the communities and their history, and to have a better understanding of living conditions in Roma neighborhoods.

When interviewing the relevant actors, care was taken to formulate questions appropriately. According to the principles of Problem-Centered Interviewing, knowledge is the result of interaction, not extraction (Witzel & Reiter, 2012). Therefore, while interviewing the community, questions were largely open and unstructured, formulated to invite reflection,

discussion, and the retelling of daily and historical events in the person's life. Both the relationship between the respondent and the object and the relationship between the respondent and the researcher have been considered at all times to minimize data bias (Witzel & Reiter, 2012). The complete list of questions, as formulated for the Roma communities and authorities, can be found in *APPENDIX 1: Interview Questions for the Civilians* and *APPENDIX 2: Interview Questions for the Authorities*, respectively.

To invite dialogue, all the questions have been worded in Romanian in a polite, warm, and friendly register, inviting the expression of one's own opinion and thoughts on the matter. In Romanian, respect is conveyed by conjugating verbs in the plural, as was done in the interviews. Moreover, a Moldavian accent was used to foster a sense of familiarity and strengthen the connection between the interviewer and the interviewees.

The collected data consists of field notes, photographs, interview notes (for the local authorities' interviews), and recordings (for the Roma civilian interviews). Unstructured field notes (public comments and notes) were taken at all research sites regarding any observations deemed interesting at the time. Moreover, pictures were taken to showcase the current state of water sources, toilets, and garbage collection areas. Interview recordings were transcribed by hand because the interviewees' strong Moldavian accents made the audio files unprocessable by AI. Then, all the notes and transcripts were coded using Atlas.TI were divided by the environmental service they describe.

Consent was obtained using an informed consent form translated into Romanian or by recording people's consent on audio (after they were informed of the background and purposes of the study). The interviewees received one copy to keep and were encouraged to contact the researcher with any questions. The interviewees were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences or questions. The collected data is anonymized, and personal identifying information such as name, age, or profession was not recorded. All gathered data is stored on the university's OneDrive account, in accordance with WUR guidelines. Data obtained on paper was also converted to digital form and uploaded onto the cloud server, and the papers were shredded upon sync completion. After the completion of the thesis, the raw

data and signed consent forms shall be submitted to WUR's Environmental Policy department's secretariat, where they shall be stored on a secure server for 10 years.

This chapter will conclude with a statement on the researcher's positionality and the ethics of data gathering.

3.6 Positionality and ethics

Growing up in Western Moldavia exposed me to racist ideologies from a young age, which I did not question until I moved abroad at the age of 19 and fell in love with a person of color. Through my budding relationship, I began breaking down the stereotypes I had about other skin colors. However, even though I made rapid progress, my immediate family chose not to, shutting down any conversation hinting towards my partner for the whole 5 years we were together. This not only broke my heart but also made me determined to fight racism and the lack of information regarding the lives of minorities in my country. This personal mission shapes me to interact with different communities and relevant authorities in an empathetic and respectful manner. At the same time, my experiences living abroad and connecting with diverse cultures allow me to recognize systemic and individual, racially fueled biases. Moreover, my interdisciplinary study method aims to respect both cultural and environmental dimensions, and the attention to methodological details present in this work aims to relate it to a larger body of existing and future research.

Before my trip back to Western Moldavia, I was worried about my ability to blend with the locals. Even though I am Romanian, as I have been living abroad for a long time, it is sometimes difficult for me to connect with my roots, and I worried that my linguistic capabilities might create a gap between me and the interview contacts. To combat this, I decided to prepare for fieldwork by gradually incorporating more Romanian language and culture into my daily life. I started reading novels in Romanian, interacted with Romanian and Moldavian people more regularly, and tried to return to my native Moldavian accent, nowadays not often used in the city but still popular in more rural areas. I also tried to

reconnect with my culture through cooking traditional foods more often and thinking about thought patterns and cultural differences between the Netherlands and my native environment daily, even discussing them with my foreign friends.

During fieldwork, I happily realized that my preparations had led me to become the kind of interviewer I envisioned – I used a strong Moldavian accent. I created a warm, inviting atmosphere during our conversations. However, fieldwork was not emotionally easy due to the proximity to my estranged family's home. I did not see my family for the entirety of the study, even though I had to be on the same street as their home for one of the interviews; this study irrevocably increased the rift between us, due to my family's beliefs regarding Roma people. As a woman who was alone during most of the study, I had to be careful with my surroundings, having multiple scary interactions with drunk or ill-intentioned people, the worst one of them being me catching the eye of one of the most famous Moldavian prostitution rings on a bus while going back to my host family, on my last night there. Finally, as a queer person, I did not feel safe exposing this part of my identity, knowing that I would probably be kicked out of my host family's residence if I did so, and that most of my interviewees would not have reacted favorably.

Ethical risks primarily include failing to maintain privacy, widening the existing societal divide, and having authorities misinterpret or misuse the results, which is why they were considered throughout this study. Both Vânători-Neamț and Crăcăoani are small communes, and the specific Roma communities further restrict the sample size, making it challenging to anonymize the data. This is why the privacy of the people is protected by not recording any names, ages, or exact addresses, or taking pictures of them.

It was also considered that labelling people as Roma and non-Roma might be regarded as racialization, further splitting the already divided and divisive Romanian community. However, this nomenclature was deemed necessary to showcase the history of marginalization.

Overall, I wish this thesis to reflect the intersection of my interest in the environment and my desire to contribute to the scientific literature on Romanian Roma in my beloved region of

Western Moldavia, which I will always hold dear. The empirical part of the thesis shall start in the next chapter.

Chapter 4. Institutional and Legislative Structures of Marginalization

4.1 Introduction

History matters – in the regulation of space, the shaping of social change, the allocation of resources, and the processes of sedentarization. Most importantly, current service provision is influenced by history. This chapter aims to illustrate how law and history influenced the marginalization of Roma communities in the Neamț county by answering the first specific research question (*“How have historical and contemporary institutional and legislative structures shaped the current disparities in access to environmental services affecting Roma communities in Neamț county?”*). This chapter will therefore contain three parts: examining the history of Roma land migration, allocation, and settlement in Romania; outlining the Romanian legal framework regulating environmental service provision and land ownership; and analyzing how local authorities implement these services in practice.

4.2 History of land migration & allocation, shall describe the history of settlement of Roma in Europe and specifically in Romania, along with the geography of the studied locations (featuring their heightened risk of flooding and their proximity to a protected natural area). *4.3 Current legislation behind service provision* describes the Romanian legislation surrounding the obligation of authorities to provide public environmental services, touching upon tenure. Finally, *4.4 Service provision* details on the authorities’ efforts to provide water, sewerage, and waste disposal services to the Roma communities (as discussed from the perspective of the interviewed authorities).

4.2 History of land migration & allocation

The Roma people have been present in Europe since the 14th century (Kenrick, 2007). The reasons behind the arrival of different Roma tribes in various parts of Europe remain contested and are often obscured by a lack of concrete historical evidence, though it is widely accepted that the Roma tribes have migrated from Northern India to escape the oppression associated with their lower-caste status (Hancock, n.d.). They historically followed a nomadic, itinerant lifestyle. This was significantly disrupted by enslavement upon their arrival in Europe in multiple migration waves (Costache, 2011; *The Protection of the Romani Language and the Itinerant Lifestyle of Roma Minorities: A Fuzzy Approach to the Comparative Analysis* 3 *Comparative Law Review* 2012, n.d.).

Historical records indicate the arrival of Roma in Wallachia (a historical region of southern Romania) during the latter half of the 14th century, while their presence in Western Moldavia was documented in historical records at the beginning of the 15th century (Achim, 1998). The history of the Roma in Romania spans multiple phases of systemic oppression, starting from their enslavement in the early 14th century, through their genocide during World War II, and continuing with forced settlement during the communist era (Petcut, n.d.; Waluszko, 2020).

Their mistreatment continues in the present with police abuse, systemic discrimination through social exclusion, dismissal from public registers, and overall lack of public support for vulnerable individuals (Adrienne, n.d.; Apelblat, 2005; Ram, 2012; *Roma*, 2020; Rostas & Moisa, 2023). An interesting parallel between Romanian Roma and African-Americans can be made considering the timeline of subjugation, as slavery was abolished in 1855 in Moldavia and 1866 in Wallachia, and in 1865 in the United States (*From Slavery to Freedom*, n.d.; Matache, n.d.). Even in the light of movements such as Black Lives Matter, there are no equivalent large-scale campaigns in Romania. This parallel timeline of slavery, rarely acknowledged in Romanian public discourse, underscores the importance of further investigating the historical consequences of marginalization and the need for comparative historical inquiry, which this thesis seeks to address by examining current access to services in Romania.

During the communist era, sedentarization was a common punitive and separatory tool employed by local governments strongly influenced by the Soviet Union (Habeck, 2024). Forcibly settled groups were often relocated to peripheral, severely underserved areas, and these displacements were meant to accentuate existing marginalization trends (*A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*, n.d.). Meanwhile, voluntarily settled Roma populations, while still subjected to discrimination, retained a degree of autonomy in choosing their place of residence. These populations often settled in areas with comparatively better access to services and closer proximity to the majority populations, facilitating some level of integration (Pogány, 2004). Therefore, comparing forced and voluntary settlements can highlight potential differences in access to services stemming from historical marginalization.

As Romania is a country that experienced the collapse of communism, this brought about economic instability and a rise in social class division, contributing to violence towards all types of Roma communities (*Human Rights Developments*, n.d.; Ullah *et al.*, 2024). The communist era did not only bring about waves of forced sedentarization, but also positive discrimination laws involving housing, employment, and education, meant to “*integrate the Roma into the society*” and improve “*hygiene and social order*” issues, affecting the Roma regardless of their reason for settlement (Barany, 2000; De Genova, 2019). Moreover, as all Romanian Roma share a past of slavery, they have been historically disadvantaged, and this reflects in the present day (Fernandez-Bou *et al.*, 2021). Thus, even though voluntarily settled populations have greater control over their living situations, they remain in a vulnerable position in Romanian society and are therefore worth studying.

The maps of the studied communes can be seen in *Figure 2: Satellite view of Crăcăoani, highlighting the studied community*. Source: Google Maps and *Figure 3: Satellite view of Vânători-Neamț, highlighting the studied communities*. In both maps, the dark green areas represent the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains and coincide with the Vânători-Neamț Natural Park. The main rivers crossing the communes can also be seen, contrasting with the light-colored gravel. The communities studied have been circled in yellow.



Figure 2: Satellite view of Crăcăoani, highlighting the studied community. Source: Google Maps

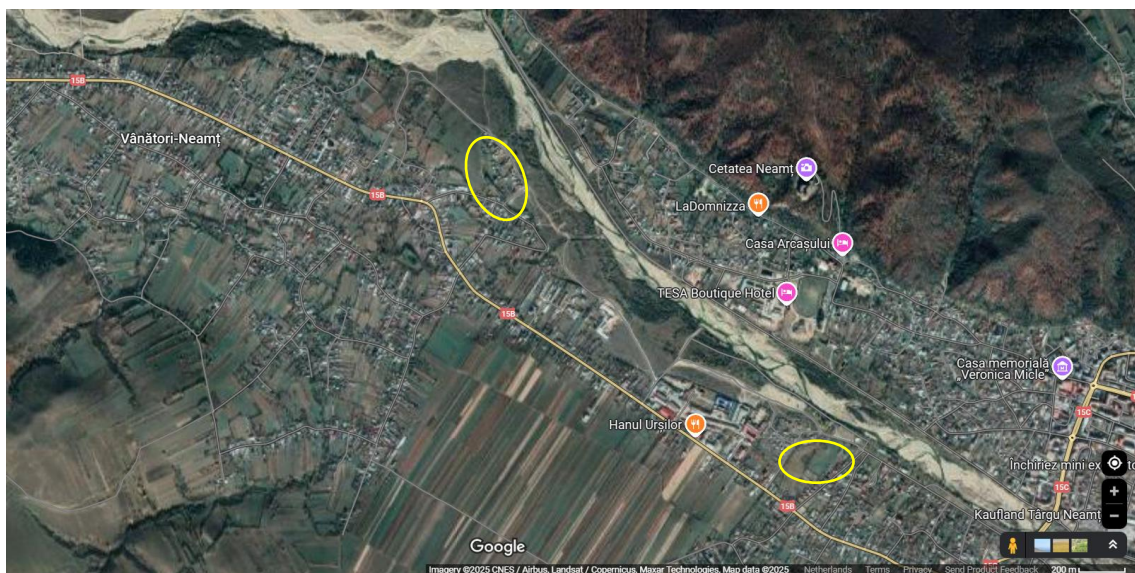


Figure 3: Satellite view of Vânători-Neamț, highlighting the studied communities. Source: Google Maps

As shown in the figures above, both communes are situated in environmentally vulnerable locations adjacent to or within the boundaries of the Vânători-Neamț National Park. This legally protected area imposes restrictions impacting infrastructure and service provision (see *Chapter 1.3*). Moreover, the studied communes are in flood-prone areas due to their proximity to large rivers, such as Neamț and Cracău, with local populations frequently affected (*Hidrografie și hidrologie*, 2015; *Mesagerul de Neamț*, 2018). Vânători-Neamț is crossed by the Neamț, Neamțișor, and Drahura rivers, all of which directly affect the studied Roma communities due to their proximity. In the other studied commune, Crăcăoani, elevation is low and vegetation is rare, raising the topological risk of flood (see *Figure 4* below) Crăcăoani town hall, personal

communication, December 16, 2024). Frăsinel & Verdeș (1999) note that, especially during the spring, the sudden melting of snow and heavy rains move large quantities of rubble and soil, causing destruction that sometimes forcibly displaces people.



Figure 4: The land is at risk of flooding from the Cracău River

The Roma population in Vânători-Neamț has always lived in generally poor conditions, a trend particularly evident in the forcibly settled community. Ex-mayor Ticu recalls in an interview that the Roma arrived in the commune in the 1960s, where 2-3 tents appeared adjacent to the commune, from which the population rapidly grew (Mesagerul Neamț, 2019). However, they were forcibly settled in a marginal location near a factory during the rule of Gheorghiu-Dej (circa 1965), following the Law of Sedentarization. This move was done by means of physical violence, involving beatings and setting non-conforming individuals on fire, having the purpose of an *“integration into the majoritarian Romanian society”* and creating what is now known as the Roma *“mother-community”²* in Vânători-Neamț (D. Rădulescu, personal communication,

² Term used to define the historically significant main community of a commune, from which other Roma groups or settlements branched off (sanitary mediator, personal communication, December 2024).

September 27, 2024). Moreover, in 1980, upon finding out about a visit of the ex-communist leader Ceaușescu to Vânători-Neamț, a group of majoritarian Romanians set Roma shelters and people on fire, forcing them to move to the outskirts of the commune and to Grumăzești, a commune found to the East of Crăcăoani (*Romi Nevoiasi Vanatori - YouTube*, n.d.). In 2019, 47 households existed in the Vânători-Neamț mother-community, located at 684V+436 Humulești, Romania (Mesagerul Neamț, 2019).

The voluntarily settled community in Vânători-Neamț, Romania, separated from the mother-community 3-4 decades ago due to interpersonal conflict among residents, and it can be found at 688G+C6, Vânători-Neamț, Romania. All its inhabitants stem from a man and his two brothers, who brought their immediate families with them and built their own homes of wood. Their houses are constructed relatively far from nearby rivers and creeks, as the people were aware of the dangers of flooding. Since these individuals share a common history with the population forcibly settled during the communist era, their experience represents a more recent instance of voluntary settlement than that of the people of Crăcăoani.

By contrast, all of the Roma of Crăcăoani moved into the commune willingly, and they generally reside in comparatively more secure and better-serviced areas than those in Vânători-Neamț (C. Andrei, personal communication, November 14, 2024). Even though the town hall was unsure of the history of its Roma population, Frăsinel & Verdeș (1999) mention that 10 former slaves of a boyar in Magazia settled here after 1850. Now, the community includes around 600 people, and it is dispersed through Crăcăoani; however, most of the people interviewed lived in the “mother community” from 18 Street (473P+CV4 Crăcăoani, Romania). The name of this street does not appear in most public records or mapping services (confirming the community’s marginality), and it was found on www.OpenStreetMap.org. The community can be found at 473P+CV4 Crăcăoani, Romania. A big flood in 2013 disproportionately affected the Roma community due to their proximity to the water, and permanently displaced some families (see *Figure 5* below).



Figure 5: A 2013 flood severely affected the Roma community. Left: man showing the height of the water. Right: destroyed home and courtyard. source: Crăcăoani Town Hall, private archive

The studied Roma communities did not willingly choose to settle in marginal locations, as these were not regarded as such at the time of settlement (in the past century). Moreover, at the time of settlement, the bureaucratic process for gaining access to services was not as complex as it is today – a Roma man mentioned, “I could get this utility pole built by just showing my ID card.” The aforementioned flood-prone character of these areas, along with their full/partial inclusion in a natural protected area, led to a recent change in land designation by the National Administration "Romanian Waters" (ANAR) and the National Forest Administration – Romsilva. This designation now makes land ownership exceedingly difficult. It transpired that, through auctions with the town hall, it is possible to acquire legal rights to land, though following the suggested bureaucratic process is not guaranteed to yield the desired results. Without documentation lawfully attesting to their address, people cannot secure contracts with electricity or water providers, leaving them outside the public utility network. According to the mayor of Vânători-Neamț, “*There is a long process that needs to be undertaken.*” (Vânători-Neamț town hall, personal communication, December 18, 2024).

Sedentarization and the communist political climate (along with the consequences of its fall) forced people to move to areas where they could not access environmental services. For all Roma (regardless of their settlement past), historical marginalization, accentuated by the authorities’ lack of recognition in the context of certain land allocation laws, reinforces the feedback loop, maintaining the lack of access to services. The histories and environmental vulnerabilities of these communities provide a critical context for understanding contemporary

disparities in access to environmental services. The cycle of exclusion shall be further explored from legal and institutional standpoints in the subchapters that follow.

4.3 Current legislation behind service provision

Local land and tenure arrangements must be understood, as these affect access to services and the legal obligations surrounding them. Non-private land and tenure arrangements in Romania include informally occupied terrains (where occupation was done without permission or supporting documentation) and with living on public terrains (owned by town halls; can be done formally or informally – this can make the difference between being connected to utilities or not) (*Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey Roma – Selected Findings | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016; Sofia, n.d.*).

The issue is whether the surveyed communities are considered informal, as the county denied the request for a list of informal communities. Under the provisions of Article 3, paragraph 1, of Law No. 17/2014 (on certain measures regulating the sale and purchase of agricultural land located outside built-up areas (Ghita, n.d.)), the town hall of Crăcăoani mentioned that its Roma community is a "*canton*", and the homes belong to public, not private, land. No such data is available regarding the Roma communities in Vânători-Neamț.

Housing Law No. 114/1996 outlines the conditions of decent housing, mentioning access to drinking water, removal of sewage water, access to electricity, and waste collection as necessary (Systems, n.d.). However, as informal communities are not recognized by law as lawful dwellings, they are not included. Moreover, Housing Law No. 114/1996 defines social housing as intended for low-income people, administered by local public authorities, and allocated based on social criteria determined by local councils. Finally, this law says that decent housing conditions should be ensured through public policy, house building support, and utility infrastructure provision.

Law no. 350/2001 on spatial planning and urbanism underlines that the connection to public utilities requires legal authorization (involving a valid construction permit) and

construction on residential land, effectively excluding informal housing (*LEGE 350 06/07/2001 - Portal Legislativ*, n.d.). Moreover, land development is not permitted without prior urban planning.

Next, the legal obligations of local and national authorities regarding service provision in marginal lands shall be discussed. Law no. 51/2006 on public utility community services does not explicitly mention that local authorities must provide services regardless of the marginality or juridical status of the inhabited land – namely, it does not address informally inhabited land (*Legea Serviciilor Comunitare de Utilități Publice Nr. 51/2006 Actualizată 2025 - Lege5.Ro*, n.d.). However, the legislation emphasizes the universal access principle and the public administration authorities' responsibility to ensure access to all citizens. Moreover, although the legislation contains no references to ethnic groups, the principle against discrimination and equitable access is invoked in general terms. Out of the researched constructs, law no. 51/2006 only addresses water, sewerage, and waste disposal. Electricity is required only for a centralized network distributing thermal energy or for public lighting; legislation does not otherwise mandate electricity distribution.

Private land declaration is impossible for another reason: a leading Roma citizen said that land smaller than 400 sqm cannot be registered. This could be a provision of Law No. 50/1991 on the Authorization of Construction Works, under which the local urban regulations apply to land ownership and construction. Cadastral registering includes both the house and an annex, which, for traditional Romanian homes, translates to a garden and potentially an outhouse, sheds, animal shelters, etc. However, some people do not know they also need to declare such annexes when declaring the size of their land, which can therefore easily fall below the required 400 sqm, potentially missing the opportunity to obtain legal proof of ownership of their homes. This is in accordance with Law on Land Resources No. 18/1991 (*LEGE 18 19/02/1991 - Portal Legislativ*, n.d.). Moreover, concession is not possible without the lack of debt and payment of fines, which disproportionately affect Roma people due to their racial segregation and some of the population's increased occurrence rate of petty offenses (European Roma Rights Center, 2001; Vânători-Neamț town hall, personal communication, December 18, 2024).

According to the surveyed laws, the authorities responsible for providing service are local public administration authorities (municipalities/communes, through their town halls), the Neamț county council, the central government (via Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration), intercommunity development associations (i.e. ApaServ for water provision and sewerage disposal, waste collection companies, and energy providers), and projects must be overseen by the National Regulatory Authority for Public Utility Community Services (ANRSC).

According to the interviewed town halls, to gain access to public utilities, the following process must be undertaken: first, legal landownership must be established. After this, a real estate construction article must be published. Next, property registration must be completed, after which access to utilities can finally be secured. This process is illustrated in Figure 6 below.

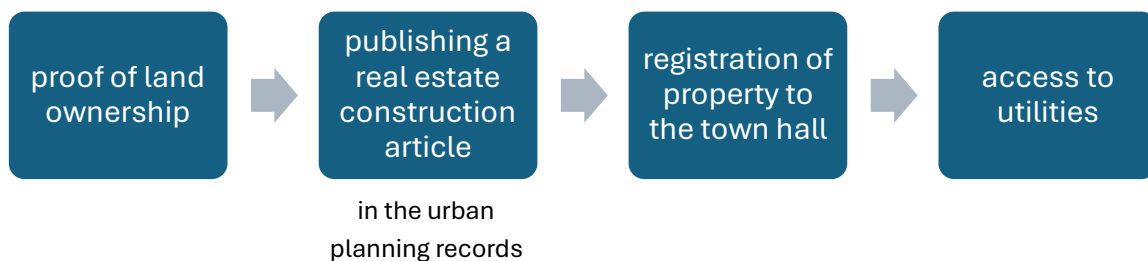


Figure 6: The administrative process behind securing access to utilities

This subchapter showcased that the conditions imposed by legislation for service provision are rarely met in informal Roma communities. Therefore, the law tends to reinforce legal exclusion rather than enabling access to land tenure for marginal communities. Moreover, electricity provision is not considered an integral part of environmental services in the surveyed laws. However, this does not necessarily confine communities to a lack of service provision, as it shall be explored in the next subchapter.

4.4 Service provision

This chapter will discuss service provision from the authorities' perspective, as this is an integral part of describing marginalized Romanian Roma's access to environmental services. It will showcase the variation in treatment across the three studied communities, as the willingness of

local authorities (town halls) can improve access to services beyond the minimum required by legislation. Electricity is not discussed because it was not deemed a mandatory public service under the law. First, land allocation and tenure from the authorities' perspective shall be discussed; then, waste management and water and sewerage provision shall follow.

To begin with, the relevant Romanian local government authorities are town halls, which administer the residents of the commune at hand. According to Romanian legislation, mayors are elected through direct vote every four years, though the same person can be re-elected an unlimited number of times. Candidates must be Romanian citizens, at least 23 years old, and must not have legal restrictions. They have the power of direct decision-making at the town hall level, overseeing public services, local development, budget implementation, civil registry, and acting as the local representative of the central government when needed (*LEGE 115 19/05/2015 - Portal Legislativ*, n.d.). Therefore, mayors can directly influence the funds benefiting marginal communities and have the potential to improve livelihoods even beyond the scope of current legislation. For this study, two mayors were interviewed: the mayor of Crăcăoani and the mayor of Vânători-Neamț. They had different attitudes towards their Roma communities, as seen in the mandatory (legal) minimum conditions employed in Crăcăoani, a stark contrast with the continuous voluntary efforts in Vânători-Neamț. It could be seen that where there is a will, there is a way.

The first possible way to obtain tenure over land is through adjustments to river flow and redesignating areas from flood-prone to safe. Changes to legal documentation have been possible where river flows are adjusted and the authorities are willing to fund the changes. Thanks to the change in the Neamț river course, 90% of the households in one of the communities in Vânători-Neamț have legal documentation proving ownership of their homes. Most of these homes are owned by the older generation, as this process has been done over the past two decades.

The second way to secure tenure is to apply for funds, collaborate with NGOs, or grant extraordinary concessions. For example, some of the homes in the Vânători-Neamț involuntarily settled community were legally built by NGOs. Moreover, the Town Hall of Vânători-Neamț mentioned that it is willing to grant land concessions to support its population. Furthermore, the

mayor of Vânători-Neamț is laying the groundwork for exchanging fines for public service hours, a decision that could help the impoverished pay off existing debt and, in turn, bring communities closer to land ownership. By contrast, in Crăcăoani, the authorities do not want to take responsibility for issuing building permits, citing that the community lives in a disaster-stricken area, showcasing the difference in attitudes between town halls.

Applying to funds can also result in the construction of facilities, rather than aid in land allocation. In Vânători-Neamț, the town hall invested in the construction of a public bath powered by solar panels, fitted with showers, sinks, a laundry room, and toilets, providing public sewerage and sanitation services. However, the building quickly fell into disrepair due to the community's purported negligence within months, and the town hall was reluctant to invest in fixing it. When the public bath was operational, it quickly became a place where head lice could spread. Access to the bath was conditioned by those living close to it, marginalizing part of the community. The public bath is, at the time of writing, unusable and locked by key.

A third way to secure property legally is through mandatory land allocations. According to Law No. 15 of January 9, 2003, on support granted to young people for building a privately owned home (*LEGE 15 09/01/2003 - Portal Legislativ*, n.d.), the town hall must grant impoverished people aged 18-35 land plots from the private domain of Administrative Territorial Units for building a home. However, in Crăcăoani, Roma youth are given land on the Ghindău hill, where there are no wells and water is scarce – people need to climb down the hill and fetch water in buckets from the creek. People do not like that area and would rather struggle in the mother-community rather than go there, as they also want to be closer to the school and to have a housing situation where they can rely on a sewerage system, even if they had to make one themselves. It is not possible to do so on the Ghindău hill, due to the soil. Previously, all Roma people lived there, but they began moving into the commune as soon as they could afford to, due to challenging living conditions. However, according to Roma citizens' testimony, the Town Hall of Crăcăoani is still only granting land on Ghindău Hill to Roma youth.

Changes happen through a dialogue between the authorities and Roma citizens. Neamț County employed a sanitary mediator to bridge the gap between authorities and the community

and to discourage the latter from acting unfavorably. There are efforts to include and help the Roma communities in sustainable ways: *“We keep talking to them, the mediator speaks their dialect.”* (Vânători-Neamț town hall, personal communication, December 18, 2024). However, in Vânători-Neamț, any decision regarding the Roma communities takes a long time, as potential changes are thoroughly discussed with the inhabitants.

Next, waste removal services will be examined, as this is an environmental service that local authorities must provide. The Town Hall of Crăcăoani was previously fined by the Neamț Environmental Protection and Romanian Waters for reasons of environmental neglect (see *Figure 7*). However, both the town halls of Crăcăoani and Vânători-Neamț do not take responsibility for supplying communities with garbage bins, as they have deemed previous sanitation efforts to be unsuccessful: *“They throw garbage in the creek, they do not use garbage bins. The population does not use the dumpsters, although there were several”* (Crăcăoani town hall, personal communication, December 16, 2024). Therefore, the town halls prefer to monitor communities from a distance and periodically encourage them to dispose of waste, without providing the necessary infrastructure.

By contrast, the water provision and sewerage systems are handled by a private company called ApaServ (ensuring county-wide water distribution), which – while commissioned by town halls – operates independently from local authorities. ApaServ maintains that tap water is drinkable everywhere in the county, being monitored by their own Control Lab and the Public Health Directorate, a county-level institution³. The company also purifies wastewater in accordance with two European directives, namely the Water Framework Directive (WFD - Directive 2000/60/EC) and the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (UWWTD - Directive 91/271/EEC). All the water and sewerage systems are property of their respective Administrative-Territorial Units, with 2-3 exceptions in which the County Council administers these systems under Law 51 (these do not cover the areas studied).

³ This whole paragraph was informed by (ApaServ, personal communication, December 9, 2024)



Figure 7: The Cracău riverbank is littered with garbage and heavily polluted

However, the communities studied did not benefit from public access to water. In Crăcăoani, although a drinkable water system is already built, it has not been taken over by ApaServ. These systems are “*built way more than 15 years ago*”, as mentioned by a contact of the Crăcăoani town hall, but more exact data was kept secret due to the reluctance of the interviewed person. The Prefecture provided a different answer when asked about the reason behind the lack of drinking water in Crăcăoani, quoting problems with the CDA (North) main pipeline, which is old and prone to failures. They mentioned that repair work is underway and that the entire northern part of Neamț County is affected. Funding comes from the County Council and the government's reserve funds, totaling 3.2 million RON (according to the Prefecture). Moreover, there are offers from several companies to redo the feasibility study, and the town hall considers this a priority project, being more important than paving the roads⁴. In Vânători-Neamț, Apa Serv does not service the main areas inhabited by Roma communities, despite its director denying this.

In one community, thanks to a Town Hall project, a network of wells was constructed along the water (see *Figure 8: Well built by the town hall in the Roma community*), approximately 200m apart. According to the Town Hall, these are declared as safe, as biological samples are taken

⁴ Paragraph informed by (Crăcăoani town hall, personal communication, December 16, 2024; Neamț county Prefecture, personal communication, December 17, 2024)

annually from all wells by an external monitoring company under contract with the Public Health Directorate (DSP) and the city hall.



Figure 8: Well built by the town hall in the Roma community



Figure 9: The non-functioning "water house" of Crăcăoani

People in the studied marginal areas also do not benefit from public sewerage services, even though infrastructure is built in their vicinity. A large, elevated water tower has been built in Crăcăoani, which is not yet functional (see *Figure 9: The non-functioning "water house" of Crăcăoani*). Presently, E.ON (a large electricity distributor) has granted approval for electricity at the water house, and plans are underway to make the facility operational (Crăcăoani town hall, personal communication, December 16, 2024). In Vânători-Neamț, the town hall constructed a

water treatment plant near one of the studied communities; however, it does not serve its residents, as they are not connected to the water and sewerage networks (Vânători-Neamț town hall, personal communication, December 18, 2024).

Nevertheless, ways to improve access to water and sewerage infrastructure exist. ApaServ recommended that all Administrative Territorial Units consider an annual investment plan to improve water and sewerage systems, while continuing to investigate potential safe water sources. These investments can be made from their own funds or by applying to government and European funds. Therefore, ApaServ reiterated that the willingness of town halls to improve the livelihoods of marginal communities could directly help them secure access: *“Administrative Territorial Units should find new drinking water sources; it is their responsibility.”* (ApaServ, personal communication, December 9, 2024). For larger investments, the County Company for Fund Absorption is the only entity legally authorized to apply to European Cohesion Funds (Crăcăoani town hall, personal communication, December 16, 2024).

4.5 Conclusion

Sedentarization can be regarded as another tool of marginalization that continues to impact Roma people’s lives through their confinement to marginal locations. While the two studied communes, Vânători-Neamț and Crăcăoani, have different histories, they share a similar present-day situation with the majority of their Roma inhabitants. Moreover, even though decades ago, Roma people were forcibly settled in marginal locations in which access to services was sparse, this situation is not likely to change. Nowadays, obtaining legal documentation is made even more difficult by the recent landmarking as flood-prone or as part of a natural protected area. This creates a reinforcing loop in which marginalized people are denied access to services.

Securing access to environmental services is difficult due to the lack of legal documentation for dwellings. Romanian law does not require public service provision by authorities in the absence of such documentation. Moreover, legislation does not consider electricity as a necessary environmental service, unless it is used for public lighting or heating.

This means that, according to the law, town halls are not required to secure access to services in marginal, informal communities.

Nevertheless, the attitude of local authorities (whether mayors comply with existing legislation or actively invest in these communities) can make a difference in the lives of marginal communities, thereby varying accessibility to environmental services across communes. Sometimes, when they confine their actions strictly to the legally binding requirements, authorities act in ways that are insufficient or defeat the original purpose (e.g., giving people land in an even more marginal location, or failing to encourage good waste management practices). In other cases, there is an effort to secure utilities beyond existing legislation, such as securing national and European development funds for marginal populations and building a public sanitation facility that the residents can use. These days, public tap water and sewerage services are inaccessible in all of the studied Roma communities, although infrastructure is currently being built.

Knowing this, we now turn to a new chapter that details the lived experiences of the people in the studied communities. This will provide another perspective, completing the picture of authorities and citizens.

Chapter 5. Lived Experiences

5.1 Introduction

This section presents the lived experiences of Roma communities regarding environmental services and the state, from the perspectives of Roma inhabitants and my field notes. It seeks to answer the second sub-research question (*“How do Roma communities in Neamț county experience and respond to the institutional and social processes that affect access to environmental services?”*) by describing access to services through the lens of views towards the authorities.

The chapter is divided into five subchapters that discuss various themes observed during fieldwork, feature relevant, striking examples, and analyze possible ideologies and politics they might stem from. Together, these subchapters move from dependency and exclusion to resistance and social hierarchy, providing a layered account of how Roma communities experience and interact with the state surrounding environmental services. The order of the subchapters is explained by the fact that dependency on the state forms the basis of interactions between the authorities and the Roma, which are complemented by the active exclusion experienced by the marginalized, leading to actions of resistance or acceptance by the population. Finally, social hierarchy plays a role in painting a complete picture of the environmental living conditions of the studied populations.

5.2 Dependency on the State presents situations in which, because Roma residents are dependent on authorities, they do not feel like they need to maintain publicly built facilities, not realizing the value of preserving them. *5.3 Active Exclusion* showcases the effects of administrative exclusion, in which authorities are maintaining the Roma people's marginal status without providing options for a better life. *5.4 Responses aimed at the State* addresses the response towards state services, which can be either agreement or resistance. *5.5 Social hierarchy* discusses the racial implications of some of the observations, pointing towards the continuation of a long history of discrimination against Roma. Finally, the chapter ends with *5.6 Conclusions*, in which the chapter's main points are summarized.

5.2 Dependency on the state

Citizens, regardless of ethnicity, depend on the state and its institutions in many respects, including access to environmental services. However, this dependency can lead to undesirable behaviors if the communities benefiting from services see public systems as uniquely maintained and fixed by the authorities, and therefore not worth protecting and using with care. This can lead to a loss of value in public access networks in the eyes of the public, and, in some cases, even to vandalism.

A striking example was recorded in the involuntarily settled community of Vânători-Neamț, where no one has access to water on tap, relying on household water pumps. This is because, even though wells were previously dug with public funds, the community engaged in a behavior detrimental to the wells (namely, defecating in the wells of people who upset them, rendering the water undrinkable).

A public bathing facility built in the same community followed a similar fate of destruction. The Town Hall invested a large amount of money to create a place where people could use the restroom, shower, and do laundry, powered by electricity generated by rooftop solar panels. However, the facility was closed months later after being vandalized by the community's inhabitants. The town hall did not invest in further repairs, and the building remains locked by key as of this date. The *ex-bulibașă's* wife wistfully recalls, *"Before, we used to have a bath, a toilet. When you went into a town hall, the Romanians wouldn't put a handkerchief to their nose anymore, saying the țigani smell – we used to take baths."* Now, people have returned to using outhouses, the creek for human waste disposal, and cold river water for laundry. Baths are taken in large wooden tubs using a mix of boiled water and cold water from water pumps.

While these destructive behaviors can seem puzzling, they reflect the belief that maintenance is an obligation of the state and that the provided infrastructure is not theirs to use or take care of. There is a lack of value placed on what they do not own, seemingly privileging ownership over access. The lack of citizen inclusion in decision-making can foster the perception that these services are imposed rather than co-owned. Acts of vandalism, then, become not only expressions of frustration or powerlessness but also reflect a disconnect between the community and the state.

However, even in the face of behaviors that hinder access to services, people depend on authorities in their daily lives. When authorities fail to provide access, people organize access to essential services themselves. In the remaining part of this sub-chapter, what is available to the people, and ways of maintaining/self-provisioning, shall be detailed.

To begin with, sewerage systems were absent in all the communities studied. Therefore, people relied on private septic tanks for wastewater collection, which involved digging a hole in

the garden and then cementing it, with periodic emptying services. In some cases, residents throw used water onto the ground because they cannot access the nearby wastewater plant. Every family interviewed has a toilet (typically an outhouse) that 3-15 people use. Some people have laundry machines, but those who do not wash their laundry outside in rivers and creeks, even when the temperature drops below zero. The river's edge is often fragile, unstable, or covered with cement blocks at about a 60-degree angle, making it easy for people to slip and injure themselves. I have been told by the citizens that the Crăcăoani water tower mentioned in *Chapter 4.4* was filled with water only once, during its inauguration, when the project was not yet connected to the electric grid, and as such, the population does not benefit from its existence. According to a citizen, *"The water house was never filled with water except at the inauguration, an inauguration held without the project being connected to electricity. At present, we have approvals from Eon for electricity for the water house"*.

None of the studied communities had access to tap water; they relied on their own water pumps or wells installed by authorities. According to the Crăcăoani Town Hall, their wells are declared as safe, as biological samples are taken annually by an external monitoring company under contract with the Public Health Directorate (DSP) and the city Hall. However, some residents gave a different answer, saying they had heard that only 3 water sources in the commune are drinkable (namely, 3 mountain springs), and that they always boil water from the wells. They cited the gray, sludgy color and consistency of the water, especially during drought, along with the unsatisfactory well depth, as the reasons behind their decision. A citizen remarked, *"We're not very satisfied. Water is the way it is, the one we drink from wells, but it's not healthy. Sometimes the water in the wells runs out, and then we have to struggle to bring it from wherever we can"*. I drank water from one of the mountain springs for my entire stay in Crăcăoani, approximately 9 days, and I can say it has a strong mineral taste, unlike that of bottled water, and gray flakes floating in the water column, signaling the inclusion of foreign bodies. There has been at least one documented citizen-led attempt to dig more fountains. Still, the project was denied funding because it focused solely on creating four strategically placed wells (close to areas with the largest Roma populations), which were deemed insufficient. People, therefore, mainly rely on

house water pumps for water supply (see *Figure 10* below), and no one has access to water on tap.



Figure 10: The outdoor water pump of the bulibașă in the Vânători-Neamț "Cetate" community

Access to electricity was available only in Crăcăoani, and the other communities did not benefit from it. However, even though the quality of life seems higher in Crăcăoani, people struggle with the land allocation law, as Roma youth are sent to the Ghindău hill, where there are no wells and water is even scarcer. People need to climb down the hill and get water from the creek in buckets. People do not like that area and would rather struggle in the mother-community rather than go there, as they also want to be closer to the school and to have a housing situation where they can rely on a sewerage system, even if they had to make one themselves. It is not possible to do so on the Ghindău hill. Previously, all Roma people lived there, but they began moving into the commune as soon as they could afford to do so, due to challenging living conditions. However, the Town Hall is still only providing land on Ghindău Hill to Roma youth⁵. Even the people living in the mother community have their complaints – people repeatedly reported wanting their conditions to be different, and more in line with the way more privileged people get to live. For example, one Roma lady whose home is in an alley parallel to the main

⁵ According to Roma citizens.

road said it sometimes takes the authorities over 3 weeks to empty her garbage bin. Another citizen of Crăcăoani reported, “*We moved here because we had nowhere else to go*”.

Dependency on the state, however, is often reinforced and complemented by practices of administrative exclusion and selective use of legislation, where institutional and interpersonal dynamics further restrict Roma access to services, as can be seen in Section 5.3.

5.3 Active exclusion

The exclusion experienced by Roma communities from environmental services is not limited to geographic marginality or a lack of infrastructure. During the study, the lack of legal proof of property was deemed to be an important impediment to securing access to environmental services, leading to a cascade of administrative exclusion, as described in *Figure 6*: the residents not being registered in official tenure records results in private service providers being constrained by local authorities to deny service. This can be regarded as procedural injustice, as it represents the failure of institutions to include marginal Roma communities specifically in public service networks.

Administrative exclusion affects Roma regardless of their settlement history. To begin with, the studied community was forced to live in a place where service provision was not possible. On the other hand, while the studied voluntary settlement communities had some choice over their location, they still moved to marginal areas, mirroring existing Romanian societal dynamics. Moreover, as they moved to areas that were not considered unfit for living at the time of settlement, their situation still falls under the umbrella of administrative exclusion, as authorities do not provide other options for accessing public environmental services.

An interesting example illustrating the relationship between people and the state presented itself in the voluntarily settled community in Vânători-Neamț, which has functional utility poles in close vicinity – one of them is in the yard of the *bulibașă*. It was built decades ago, paid for by the community leader’s grandfather, and its construction was approved by using his ID card only. It was in use for about 20-25 years, benefiting the entire community, and utility bills

were paid with the grandfather's pension. However, its usage stopped when the grandfather died, and the community did not have enough income to keep paying the utility bills. Now, even though some community members could afford to pay these bills, they cannot enjoy electricity anymore, as restoring the connection requires official proof of house ownership, which no one in the community has. The *bulibaşă* described: *"It's not like in our grandparents' days anymore, when you could build your own house. Nobody asked you anything; it was allowed to build. Look, the electric pole is just 10 meters from the window. My grandfather brought the electricity from the road using just his ID card and paid for three poles"*. This situation is particularly frustrating because several houses still have electricity meters installed since the utility pole was constructed (see Figure 11 below).

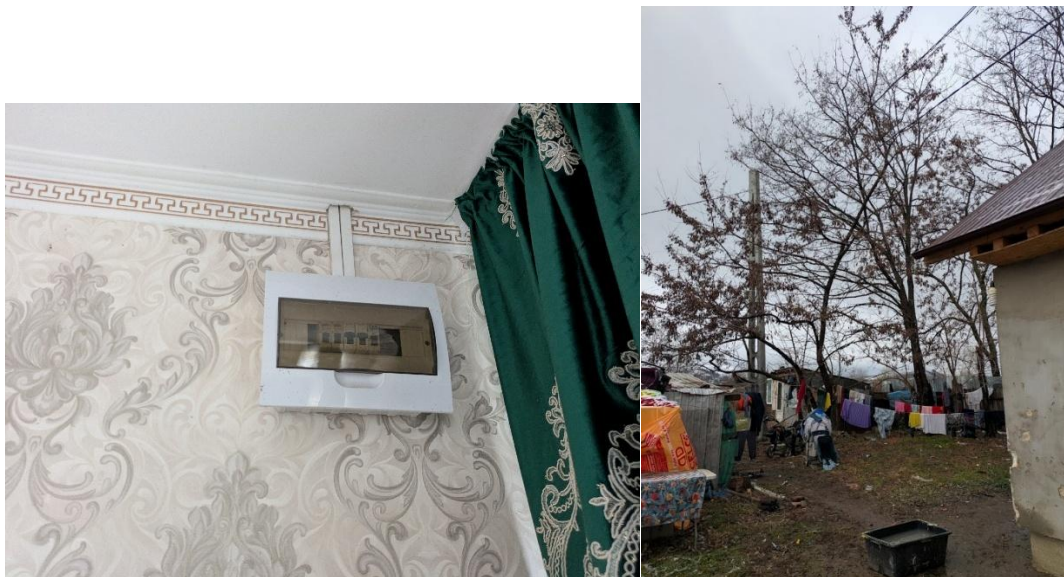


Figure 11: Electricity meter in the Vânători-Neamț voluntarily settled community (left). Non-functioning utility pole in the same community (right)

This example illustrates that even though access to services was possible at the time of settlement, the Romanian authorities changed procedures without having marginal communities in mind. This translates to policy failure to formalize service access for vulnerable populations, contributing to their active exclusion. As the legal conditions governing access to electricity changed, despite the physical infrastructure (such as utility poles and meters) already being in place, marginalized communities were disproportionately affected. Therefore, the studied community was silently excluded from the public service system. These dynamics reveal that

exclusion is actively produced through the very functioning of state and local institutions, rather than being a mere accident of settlement location.

However, subsection 5.5 shows that municipalities at times employ selective application of legislation, ensuring service provision to privileged individuals despite legal limitations. This further serves the argument of glossing over administrative exclusion when it comes to marginalized communities. Moreover, while active administrative exclusion constrains access to services, Roma communities are not merely passive recipients of these dynamics; instead, they navigate them through varying degrees of resistance or compliance toward the state, as seen in Section 5.4.

5.4 Responses aimed at the state

Throughout the study, a resistance to public services and authorities has been observed. This extended from resistance to technology to a willing separation from majoritarian society, resulting in increased stigma and distrust across Romanian society. Even unprompted, a civilian said: *“There wasn’t any filth before the Hidroelectrica⁶ project... now you’re afraid to drink the water. It produces electricity, but I don’t know where it goes or how. The energy and how it’s managed – I believe it destroys people.”*

There were multiple examples of resistance to the current infrastructure and public services. Sometimes people distrust modern, safer technology – for example, one of the leading families fears electric stoves, quoting *“seeing people exploding and dying on TV”*. Another man angrily confronted the sanitary mediator about the underground digging of electric cables, calling it highly unsafe. Another lady fears the central heating unit, preferring wooden stoves even for heating (see *Figure 12* below). Some of the inhabitants refrain from buying the cheapest bottled water, considering it unsafe, and labeling those who do as “uneducated”, instead recommending

⁶ Romania’s national hydropower company

either buying more expensive water or drinking from a mountain spring: *“Those who do not buy expensive water will pay with their health”*.



Figure 12: Traditional cooking stove, as seen in the Crăcăoani “De pe deal” community

Part of the Roma community believes itself to be separate from the mainstream Romanian public rules, a fact seen even through sanitation and garbage disposal, reinforcing negative stereotypes. Even though town halls organize annual cleaning missions, giving the community gloves and garbage bags, many people still throw garbage into the water, including items that are especially harmful to water quality, such as used condoms, diapers, and sanitary products (see *Figure 13* below). Other people even defecate on the edge of the water if their outhouse is occupied during the needed moment.



Figure 13: The Cracău riverbank is littered with garbage and heavily polluted

One particularly evocative example involves people deliberately not using the garbage bins provided, instead throwing the waste right next to them, prompting the authorities to stop providing public waste removal services. The community's *bulibaşă* saw this as a byproduct of the population's low educational level, quoting that the people "are not used to them". However, this can rather point towards willful resistance.

According to Ogbu & Simmons (2002), historically marginalized people can perceive their own place in society in undesirable ways through developing "*involuntary minority*" identities, hindering societal inclusion. This way of seeing themselves has been shaped by repeated exclusion and a perceived incompatibility with the dominant society's values, and their response to the garbage bins can reflect skepticism of the state's authority.

Unfortunately, this case ended with an erosion of trust on both sides – the Roma felt abandoned after just one attempt. At the same time, the authorities found themselves frustrated with their lack of success, entering a cycle of mistrust. Therefore, this case showcases both an attempt to improve and the community's pushback, posing questions about the reach of authorities and revealing the complicated relationship between the Roma and the Romanian state.

Resistance from the Roma also shows itself towards other categories of the Romanian population, sometimes targeting even well-meaning actors. As previously mentioned, the authorities tend to communicate with communities through the sanitary mediator, using this channel for effective dialogue. However, when people are reluctant to communicate, they pretend not to understand her, even though she has tried to learn their Romani dialect and communicate with them in it. The mediator keeps trying to explain official procedures as many times as needed, keeping in mind that some of the people she contacts have never gone to school. However, she recalls hearing one person explain to another what he pretended not to understand, indicating not only comprehension but also a lack of cooperation with the authorities. She even heard the phrase "*Look at her, she's worse than the Romanians*" (describing her). This attitude makes communication and cooperation exceedingly difficult, stunting the efforts of well-intended authorities.

However, depending on the service and the studied community, the Roma population sometimes enjoyed access to public services and agreed to maintain and secure them. For example, all inhabitants of the Crăcăoani community have access to electricity, benefiting from stable grid access, unlike residents of disadvantaged communities, who do not experience differential treatment.

Moreover, in some cases, Roma people sought access to services even if they needed to be self-funded. In Crăcăoani, connecting a household to the water system is expensive and is covered by residents at their own expense, costing approximately 6000 RON per household (approx. 1205 EUR). As a result, only a few of the interviewed Roma residents had access to tap water. Most people still relied on overburdened household water pumps (see *Figure 14* below), which tend to break down every 1-2 years due to getting clogged. Some people connect the outside water pumps to their household taps, proving their willingness to adapt to the public water system⁷.



Figure 14: Outdoor water pump

⁷ Data supplied by interviewed civilians.

However, responses such as willingness to comply with public services or resistance to them unfold within a broader social hierarchy that often positions Roma communities at its lowest tier, as will be explored in Section 5.5.

5.5 Social hierarchy

An important component of the dynamic between majoritarian Romanians and Roma people is the often-occurring social hierarchy, which places most Roma lower than majoritarian Romanians. The majoritarian society tends to look down on minorities (and therefore the Roma), often considering that they do not deserve equal rights (Kende *et al.*, 2025). As previously explored, a division in status leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy of maintaining unfortunate societal differences (Glover *et al.*, 2017).

During the civilian interviews, a story emerged that made several people cry together, about access to electricity 20 years ago. The wife of the community leader (A) agreed with the majoritarian Romanian elderly woman living across the pathway (B), through which she could connect her family's home to B's electricity supply, in exchange for paying for the energy consumed and helping her around the house. However, B started abusing her power over A, asking her to take care of her entire house (including farm animals), making her meals and coffee, and even helping her use the restroom, every day from 7 AM until 7 PM. If B got upset, she would cut off the power supply, even though A had never been late with payments. When recalling this story, other women in the room said they experienced similar situations, comparing them with slavery: *"The relationship was one of humiliation and dependency"*, said A.

This story is particularly interesting, as it combines all the dimensions studied in this chapter. It showcases resistance to the state through the illegal agreement between A and B, which was never formalized. A dependency on the state and its services is also present, as it involves a public environmental service (supplying electricity). The active exclusion is evident in the fact that, even though A and her family could afford electricity, they were not considered when designing the power grid; instead, only majoritarian Romanians were seen as potential customers. Finally, the social hierarchy perpetuating stigmas about Roma enabled B to see herself

as entitled to more than just fair payment for the energy consumed, and she considered A permanently indebted to her. Moreover, the fact that the whole group of interviewees started crying and relating to this story says that this was not an isolated incident, and that they were all victims of similar mentalities and situations.

This story showcases the internalization of social hierarchy in Romanian society and how this affects access to environmental rights. B's sense of superiority over A is a reflection of societal standards, through which unequal power dynamics are normalized. Furthermore, A is pushed into silent compliance due to the authorities' lack of support in securing access to services. Even though A lives in the Crăcăoani voluntarily settled community, her story reflects the way those at the bottom of the social order ladder must accept demeaning conditions, as it is the only way for them to improve their lives.

The final example concerns another instance of authorities selectively providing services, currently frustrating the residents of the Vânători-Neamț voluntarily settled community. The residents see this situation as racism, and it makes them hopeless about their futures. They complain about the lack of support from the authorities, saying they feel forgotten and that the consequences of the illegality of their settlement only affect them.

The community consists solely of Roma residents, with one exception: a majoritarian Romanian. While the Roma live quite far from the water, his home is right next to the water, on muddy land, and is in obvious danger in case of flooding (pictured in *Figure 15*). However, even though he also does not have any legal documents for his property, he has access to electricity and tap water. The *bulibașă* believes this to be evidence of obvious racism from the authorities, and keeps using this example in dialogues with the mayor: *“When the authorities see a (majoritarian) Romanian on TV living in poor conditions, you know how quickly they rush to give them electricity? But for us, no...”*. The Roma residents think that the mayor of Vânători-Neamț has tried to improve their lives in the past. Still, she stopped trying when she was met with strong criticism from other council members, being called a *“mayor just for the țigani”*: *“I argued with the mayor because of the electricity issue, but I attended the meeting, and I saw that when she suggested in the council to bring in the electricity, the Romanian councilors only raised their hands*

to show they were against it". The interviewees also mentioned that other majoritarian Romanian inhabitants of the commune also seem not to wish for better life conditions for their Roma neighbors.



Figure 15: The house of the majoritarian Romanian, having access to public utilities (far-right), and its proximity to the river

This story, therefore, shows how social hierarchy and racialized power structures shape access to essential services, reinforcing marginalization. Despite the identical legal statuses of the majoritarian Romanian and the Roma residents of the studied community, access to environmental services is clearly dictated by ethnicity, constituting a racialized double standard. Moreover, the way the council members shame the good-intentioned mayor illustrates how hierarchical views extend beyond bureaucracy into public discourse, feeding into all the facets explored in this chapter.

5.6 Conclusions

The state (with its institutions, such as local authorities and legislation), along with existing social relations, shapes the lives that Roma people are forced to lead. However, Roma residents are not

simply passive actors; they have agency and adopt a wide spectrum of attitudes towards the authorities and newer technology, ranging from resistance to acceptance. It was seen that not providing services is not simply a passive act towards the people, as their attitude towards new incentives can also affect access, along with the social relations surrounding Roma communities. Moreover, mistrust from any significant category of the Romanian society can affect provisioning and heighten overall social tensions. In the case of Roma residents, mistrust is motivated by the history of marginalization they have been experiencing and is shown through the lack of maintenance of public infrastructures, reluctance to engage with the authorities, or not using the provided services.

People's dependence on the state and its institutions is expressed in different ways. For example, it can make maintaining public goods and services more difficult by fostering emotional distance between Roma residents and these services. Examples of active exclusion and social hierarchy were explored, highlighting how interpersonal and institutionalized dynamics affect compliance and the overall experience of public environmental services. Regarding environmental public service provision, Roma communities are often positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as evidence shows that individuals of other ethnicities, living in the same conditions, sometimes gain access to services while the Roma do not. This makes feelings of humiliation and dependency arise towards the state and other categories of the population, affecting the entire Romanian society.

Finally, a comparison between Chapters 4 and 5 aims to illustrate the way they complement each other. *Chapter 5* aims to complete the landscape portrayed in *Chapter 4* by showcasing the lived experiences of the Roma residents. While *Chapter 4* maintained a mostly optimistic tone, underlying the efforts of authorities and how the people in power can affect access to services, *Chapter 5* provided a more neutral view. Moreover, in *Section 5.5*, the way the Roma perceive the differences between the relevant authorities was briefly touched upon. As *Chapter 5* included field data as well, it provides a palpable counterpart to the paperwork-heavy *Chapter 4*.

Chapter 6. Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to connecting the existing literature to the results of this study. This analysis is important because it situates this case study within the wider scientific literature and allows comparison with other cases, making this research valuable in a broader context.

This study aimed to uncover the mechanisms through which settlement processes shape environmental inequality and to identify the reasons behind public service exclusion despite existing legal provisions, by comparing cases of forced and voluntary settlement. In an urban political ecology framework, three dimensions emerged from the literature review: historical marginalization, institutions, and local relations. Answering the main research question meant studying the histories of access to environmental services in Roma communities and investigating how both political and socioeconomic factors (in which the Roma are active actors, with varied responses) influence current provision. In this chapter, I seek to frame the study's results against the problem statement and research questions formulated in *Chapter 1*, returning from an empirical analysis to a broader theoretical discussion.

To begin with, *6.2: Answering the sub-questions* summarizes the study's empirical results, providing a logical bridge to the next subsection, the discussion. *6.3: Discussion by dimension of analysis* analytically links the literature review and the three emerging dimensions of political ecology (of historical exclusion, institutions, and local relations) with the results chapters, Chapters 4 and 5, covering both forcibly and voluntarily settled communities. Finally, *6.4: Advancing the framework of urban political ecology* argues that the three dimensions of analysis derived from the literature constitute a powerful framework within urban political ecology for investigating access to environmental services.

6.2 Answering the sub-questions

This subsection portrays the conclusions of Chapters 4 and 5 as direct answers to the sub-research questions.

To begin with, the first specific research question was “*How have historical and contemporary institutional and legislative structures shaped the current disparities in access to environmental services affecting Roma communities in Neamț county?*”. This was addressed in *Chapter 4: Institutional and Legislative Structures of Marginalization*, which examined the aforementioned dimensions. The history of land migration and allocation experienced by Romanian Roma was explored, focusing on the forced sedentarization that confined them to intentionally marginal locations. While initially all Romanian Roma were forcibly settled through enslavement, with the passing of time and the abolition of slavery, communities were divided into voluntarily settled (who had agency in choosing their place of living) and forcibly settled (who were further oppressed under the communist regime). During the study, it became apparent that both forcibly and voluntarily settled populations experience similar fragmentation of access to basic environmental services, regardless of their settlement history, and this pattern is unlikely to change in the near future due to tenure issues.

By analyzing contemporary institutional and legislative structures shaping disparities in access, it was found that most of the interviewed residents lacked legal documentation for the land they live on, as the land's legal status changed after their settlement. The studied communities now live in either flood-prone areas where building is prohibited or in natural protected areas, creating reinforcing loops in which marginalized people are denied access to services, as Romanian law requires public service provision only for dwellings with tenure. Although Romanian legislation prohibits discrimination in basic service provision, active exclusion was observed, as the studied communities are informal and access to services is mandated only for formal settlements. Moreover, electricity is not considered an essential public service by Romanian law, and so provisioning is not mandatory.

These legal hurdles create a legal right for town halls not to provide basic environmental services to marginal, informal communities; however, while some authorities choose to provide the minimum legal requirements, others go beyond this standard in providing basic services. Therefore, although public tap water and sewerage services are currently unavailable in all of the studied Roma communities, the attitude of local authorities plays a significant role in the development of informal infrastructure and the potential formalization of land.

The second sub-research question formulated was “*How do Roma communities in Neamț county experience and respond to the institutional and social processes that affect access to environmental services?*”. This was addressed in *Chapter 5: Lived Experiences* – complementing the perspective of the law and authorities, this section showcased the realities of Roma residents as seen by them. The agency of Roma residents, shown through both various acts of resistance and acceptance, influenced service provision and the surrounding social relations. Moreover, these social relations influence the state and the willingness of local authorities to provide access beyond what is stipulated by law. Feelings of mistrust and humiliation, while motivated by the experienced history of marginalization, increased social tensions with other layers of the Romanian community, and manifested as a reluctance to engage and cooperate with authorities.

However, the dependency of Roma citizens on the state and its institutions became apparent, despite the experienced emotional separation from public infrastructures. Service provision was further hindered by institutional active exclusion and the continuation of marginalization. At the same time, evidence showed that individuals of other ethnicities living in similar areas can gain access to services, while this proved impossible for the Roma. The studied marginal communities lacked access to the basic environmental services (water and sewerage, electricity, and waste removal). They were therefore compelled to secure their own provision through household-scale infrastructure.

All in all, this section summarizes the empirical chapters' answers to the specific research questions. In the next section, these conclusions will be juxtaposed with the literature review (and the three dimensions derived from it), indicating broader analytical patterns and leading to an analytical set of observations that can be applied to other case studies.

6.3 Discussion by dimension of analysis

6.3.2 Historical exclusion and its legacy

Returning to the problem statement, it was noted that little attention has been paid to how settlement history influences current disparities in service access, particularly in Western Moldavia; therefore, this study seeks to uncover the historical reasons behind these inequalities. Another goal of this thesis was to investigate the differences in service provision between forcibly and voluntarily settled populations. This section builds on the previously summarized findings to reveal broader trends relevant to service provision.

Through the data gathered both before the fieldwork and during it, it became clear that all Romanian Roma suffered from extensive marginalization ever since their arrival in Europe, having been enslaved for centuries and afterwards forcibly settled during the communist regime. Further marginalization affected the lives of Romanian Roma even in post-communist times. The areas they were either forcibly settled in or chose willingly were designated uninhabitable by Romanian authorities years after they built their homes. This guarantees they cannot access services, and official institutions did not attempt to provide them with alternative locations. In fact, even people who chose their own place of residence settled in marginal locations, mirroring Romanian societal dynamics between majoritarian and minority populations.

This long history of oppression is not over, and just as Mann (2007) found, the history of slavery is reflected by the current situation of environmental service provision. Even though Romanian law provides against discrimination, marginalization persists through echoes of the past reflected in the current situation. The informality of most Roma settlements – being excluded even from official county documentation – and the abundance of bureaucratic paperwork required for access to services make it extremely difficult to meet the conditions for service provision, mirroring the findings of McFarlane & Silver (2017) (albeit in a different context). Moreover, while securing access to public environmental services was easier at the time of moving (for example, in the case of the Vânători-Neamț voluntarily settled community and its electric pillar), this has become impossible with the advancement of bureaucracy. The authorities do not provide any concessions for already-existing infrastructure.

Furthermore, in this study, both examples of blatant discrimination (in the case of the majoritarian Romanian having access to environmental services, while his Roma neighbors do not) and complicit, lawfully permissible active exclusion (through authorities giving land in even more marginal locations to impoverished young Roma, similar to the studies of Karpouzoglou & Zimmer (2016) and Mann (2007)) were found. The continuous administrative exclusion leads to fragmented infrastructures, reinforcing inequalities (Silver, 2015). Negative responses and a lack of trust from the Roma population towards the authorities stem from a background of historical tension, according to McFarlane & Silver (2017).

This confirms the importance of history and its long-standing effects on marginalized communities, as identified in the literature review. It was also seen that attempts at corrective justice (the duty to provide reparations mentioned by Kuehn (2004, *p. 14*)) are limited to the goodwill of local authorities rather than being mandated by law. Slavery, forced sedentarization, and subsequent administrative neglect (due to the informal status of many communities) have been shaping the exclusion of the Roma in basic environmental service provision up until the present.

Based on these empirical results, historical exclusion is a valuable tool for analyzing access to environmental services, as it provides the necessary context for understanding the lack of infrastructure. However, service provision can be better understood by discussing the institutions involved, which leads to the next subsection.

6.3.3 Institutional dynamics and governance

The problem statement highlighted the need to understand why Roma communities in Western Moldavia remain excluded from public services despite existing legal provisions. This was investigated in *Chapters 4.3* and *4.4*, as an analysis of legislation and the viewpoints of the institutional actors involved. It was observed that Roma citizens are self-reliant in the face of institutional exclusion, though this does not negate the need for formalized provision systems. This section builds on the study's results to reveal broader trends relevant to service provision, moving the analysis beyond the current case study to a set of broadly applicable observations.

As the literature by Karpouzoglou *et al.* (2023) and Kooy (2014) suggests, informal infrastructure exists where public, formal services do not. In places where town halls were motivated to help the marginalized, they sometimes provided informal access to services. This could point to a potential formalization over time, as supported by the literature reviewed. For example, water provisioning in Crăcăoani was a mix of citizen-built infrastructure (water pumps) and town hall-built wells. In cases where public services do not exist, such as sewerage systems, the population improvised by using private septic tanks, outhouses, or simply dumping dirty water on the ground. In this chapter, the institutions involved in service provision will be detailed (categorized by type of service).

The discussion first focuses on water and sewerage provision, which represent key environmental services. According to EU law, both water provision and sewerage are the responsibility of municipalities, towns, and rural communes in Romania (*CoR - Romania - Water Management*, n.d.). Other actors involved in water provision and removal are the National Administration Romanian Waters (who monitors and assess the status of water reserves), the Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forest (drafting policy and supervising the National Administration Romanian Waters), the National Environment Protection Agency (overseeing the environmental consequences of water systems), and the National Administration Romanian Waters (overseeing public water ownership and infrastructures) (*CoR - Romania - Water Management*, n.d.; *Despre noi - Administrația Națională Apele Române*, 2023). Direct service provision is supplied by private companies, such as Apa Nova București or ApaServ (*Apaserv – Compania Județeană APA SERV SA*, n.d.; *Public-Private Partnership Legal Resource Center*, n.d.).

The next part of the analysis focuses on electricity provision, another key environmental service. In Romania, there is an extensive list of electricity distributors that operate in different areas and use various technologies. As previously mentioned, electricity is not considered an essential public service by Law no. 51/2006 (*Legea Serviciilor Comunitare de Utilități Publice Nr. 51/2006 Actualizată 2025 - Lege5.Ro*, n.d.). Therefore, it is only supplied by private actors. Moreover, because electricity is not considered essential, even though town halls work closely with electricity providers, systems are mostly built based on profit predictions

and are likely to exclude marginal communities. Electrica is the only publicly listed Romanian company operating in the field of electricity distribution and supply, although other private actors licensed to sell electricity to final consumers exist, such as E.ON, ENEL, etc. (“About,” n.d.; *Lista Furnizorilor de Energie Electrică Pe Piața Cu Amănuntul*, n.d.).

The final environmental service discussed in this thesis is waste removal. EU legislation mandates that waste is processed municipally in Romania. However, a 2025 EEA report mentions that Romania has plans to increase separate collection services in the near future (as currently it is at risk of not meeting the 2025 targets for municipal waste recycling), hinting towards waste removal services overall being insufficient (*Romania Profile on Municipal and Packaging Waste Management - 2025*, 2025). The Roma populations interviewed do not benefit from consistent waste collection services, leading to frustration among the population. Some showed resistance to the politicization of their living areas (in accordance with the findings of McFarlane & Silver (2017)), such as ignoring the provided waste bins and public littering, while others continuously tried to reason with the authorities to secure continuous access to this service.

Access to all public services is deemed to be tightly tied to tenure and the legality of housing. The only long-term solution to the tenure (and therefore access to environmental services) issue is the regulation of the Neamț and Cracău river courses – this has proved successful in specific communities in the county, putting them out of danger of flooding and within reach of the law. However, this goes beyond the scope of this study, and although it represents an essential finding, it was not further explored.

The difference in authorities’ attitudes can be explained by several factors, from the personal beliefs of the mayor and party in power to informality that trickles into otherwise formal institutions (confirming the findings of Compton & Meier (2017)). In Romania, informality can be attributed to corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the persistence of favor-based interactions, which often distort formal policy implementation and deepen inequalities in access to services (Popescu *et al.*, 2018; Volintiru *et al.*, n.d.). Romania’s public governance network is severely hindered by corruption, despite National Anti-corruption Strategies being

in place, which translates into more difficult access to services, with populations experiencing irregular or intermittent provision (OECD, 2023). Securement and maintenance can be affected by the individuals' relationship to officials or knowing the right people (the latter being regarded as negative social capital, unfortunately familiar in Romania (Soaita & Wind, 2020)).

To conclude, the institutions involved in service provision in Romania are part of a highly intricate network of both private and public actors (mirroring the findings by Silver (2015)), that act for financial interest while abiding by the law (although this is affected by informality). The administrative exclusion does not have a single reason; it is muddled by the absence of legal provisions (in the case of electricity), settlement informality, and administrative inefficiencies. While legislation clearly assigns responsibility for water, sewerage, and waste management to public authorities, and allows private actors to operate in electricity provision, the fragmented governance system renders service delivery inconsistent and often inaccessible for marginalized groups. Moreover, resolving tenure issues in marginalized communities obligates authorities to provide access to environmental services, placing communities within the legal framework.

Based on these empirical results, monitoring institutional norms and interactions is essential for analyzing environmental service provision. The observed trends are not unique to this case but represent general patterns relevant to any research involving access to services and urban political ecology. The final component of the proposed analytical framework concerns local relations, which link access to services with everyday interactions and broader societal mechanisms within an urban political ecology perspective.

6.3.4 Local relations and everyday interactions

The problem statement highlighted the need to understand the societal mechanisms that produce and maintain environmental inequality in Western Moldavian Roma communities. Local relations and their relationship to service access were primarily highlighted in *Chapter 5: Lived Experiences*, in which it was shown that the Roma continuously negotiate their place in Romanian society through both passive and active interactions (for example, by simply being of a different ethnicity, or by acting in defiance of governmental procedures, respectively). This subsection

shifts the focus from the specific case study to a broader discussion of how these interactions shape service provision within the framework of urban political ecology and access to services.

To begin with, local relations with the majoritarian population drastically affected both the securement and maintenance of access to services. Both the Roma and the majority Romanian communities hold biases against one another, and their societies appear divided. Some of the interviewed Roma citizens mentioned experiencing feelings of humiliation and exclusion, yet also of dependency, highlighting the complexity of Romanian society. The existence of a social hierarchy was obvious, primarily reflected in the fact that in the Vânători-Neamț voluntarily settled community, the majoritarian Romanian resident had access to services, while his Roma neighbors did not. Moreover, Romanian media appears riddled with conflicts between Roma and the majoritarian population, despite anti-discrimination legislation being in effect, deepening the argument that local relations are inescapable and all-encompassing (Crețu, 2014).

The relationship between governmental authorities and the Roma also emerged as a significant social dynamic during fieldwork. The divide between the majoritarian population (and its institutions) and the Roma was even made obvious through a condescending sign warning against littering found in the Vânători-Neamț forcibly settled community (which can be seen in *Figure 16* below). Moreover, the reason for posting the sign (frequent littering in the community) points to how internalized social hierarchies can negatively affect access to services. If communities see themselves as outside the majoritarian population, they will not engage in structural practices (as explored in the literature by Ogbu & Simmons (2002)). Local relations were evident both in how the goodwill of local authorities influenced service provision and in the internal conflicts within the Vânători-Neamț town hall, where council members referred to the mayor as “*a mayor only for the țigani*” because of her willingness to help the marginalized.



Figure 16: Sign cautioning against littering in the Vânători-Neamț forcibly settled community. Translation: "Promotion: Throw your garbage here, and you'll receive a fine at home. Cleanup carried out on 17.09.2022. Keep the area clean!"

Local relations are further shaped by the ways communities respond to the state, making them self-reinforcing and continuously evolving. The lack of affirmative action in legislation leaves local relations outside the law and results in informal Roma communities being excluded from its jurisdiction. Roma citizens' dependency on the state, while obvious, is then contested by them in ways that seem counterproductive to the general population or authorities (such as through vandalism), because public services were seen as uniquely the responsibility of authorities to own and maintain.

It can be argued that the entire history of land migration and allocation (and, by extension, tenure) is shaped by local relations, further underscoring their importance. Tenure, which is essential for access to environmental services, is influenced not only by formal legal frameworks but also by social interactions, power dynamics, and informal institutional practices, mirroring findings by Blaikie (1995), Harris *et al.* (2020) and Mehrpour *et al.* (2024). For example, Roma communities often rely on personal relationships or the goodwill of local officials to secure or maintain land access, and those with stronger social capital or connections are better able to assert tenure rights. Informality within governmental institutions, manifesting through corruption and bias, further affects tenure.

In the literature review, Ribot & Peluso (2003) defined access as "*the ability to derive benefits from things,*" rather than merely as the existence of rights, which are tied to (and controlled by) social aspects. This is an important distinction seen in the case of the Vânători-Neamț voluntarily settled family, which had an electricity pillar in their backyard but cannot secure a contract with an electricity firm anymore. Local relations, therefore, play a role not only

in securing initial access to services but also in their ongoing maintenance, as even though someone might have property (and therefore the right to benefit), this does not guarantee access (the ability to benefit).

The paper by Ribot & Peluso (2003) defines access through different facets, most of which were observed in the fieldwork – the only factors not regarded as relevant for this study were access to markets and to labor and labor opportunities, demonstrating the complex character of access to services. Access manifested in different forms: technology was seen through the existence of informal and formal infrastructures (e.g. wells, roads, electricity pillars); wealth was reflected through finances and equipment; knowledge involved education regarding safe practices and equipment surrounding environmental infrastructures; authority translated to access to townhalls and procedures; social identity was hindered by ethnicity; and access via the negotiation of other social relations happened both with other population segments and local authorities.

All in all, local relations helped explain environmental inequality in marginalized communities through the interplay of ethnicity, webs of power, and the authorities' formality/informality binaries. The mutual biases between the marginalized and the majoritarian populations reinforce exclusion and unequal access. At the same time, the absence of affirmative action in legislation leaves vulnerable communities outside the reach of formal legal protection. Furthermore, informal governance practices and the importance of social capital help determine who can secure and maintain tenure and, consequently, access to services. Therefore, social relations produce and maintain environmental inequality despite legislation.

These empirical results underline the importance of studying local relations when analyzing access to services, offering an outlook on social behavior, power structures, and the institutional practices of unequal service provision. Building on this understanding, the next subsection reflects on the study's contribution to urban political ecology, evaluating how the proposed analytical framework links empirical observation with theoretical insights.

6.4 Advancing the framework of urban political ecology

In the previous sections, the importance and value of the three dimensions of analysis used in the study (historical marginalization, institutions, and local relations) were discussed. In addition, the current subsection argues that these three dimensions constitute a powerful framework within urban political ecology that can be applied to other case studies investigating access to environmental services. Moreover, the intersection of urban political ecology with justice and environmental racism will be reflected upon, as this was first mentioned in *Chapter 2*.

Together, the three dimensions of analysis provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing environmental service provision within urban political ecology by considering past and current stakeholders, their motivations and actions, and the relationships among them. The stakeholders range from governmental and non-governmental institutions to Roma and majoritarian Romanian civilians and were described under the “institutions” aspect. Their actions were described in both their historical and current context, providing a view of how history affects current provision, under the historical exclusion dimension. Moreover, the relationships among the stakeholders were examined under the local relations facet. It can therefore be seen that these three dimensions, uncovered through literature review, form a complete and intuitive framework for analyzing access to services in marginalized communities. This framework is, therefore, the main contribution of this study to the field of urban political ecology.

In the literature review, it was argued that environmental justice and environmental racism represent examples of the urban political ecology framework. This study showed that environmental racism manifests not necessarily through racial policies, as Romania's legislation prohibits discrimination, but through historical marginalization and the failure to acknowledge that marginalized populations might need affirmative provisions to secure access to basic services. Moreover, the informality of institutions, as evidenced by their reliance on the authorities' goodwill and social capital, further limits the equitable distribution of environmental justice. Therefore, this study contributed to urban political ecology by connecting it to environmental justice and providing data on environmental racism, showing its realities in subtle, systemic contexts.

Through this study, it was seen that the field of urban political ecology provides a useful lens for examining urban, unjust environments of service provision. However, although urban political ecology has traditionally been applied to metropolitan contexts, this study demonstrates its relevance for understanding inequalities in access in rural and suburban settings. Moreover, it was observed that the informality of institutions and the particular focus on governmental actors revealed dynamics that extend and complicate the traditional urban political ecology framework. Some scholars also believe that urban political ecology could greatly benefit from focusing on non-governmental actors may render urban political ecology more policy relevant through understanding the *“the plurality of governance actors, their practices, rationales, normative orientations, interests and imaginaries as well as their relative and contextual power that shape local (urban) spaces and environments as well as access to (urban) resources, amenities, and services”* (N. L. Cornea et al., 2017). Another important point is that there are differences between legislation and real-life scenarios, mostly due to the informality that occurs within formal structures (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2014). Therefore, the study’s findings agree with these debates and contribute to them by extending the scope of urban political ecology to rural and semi-urban settlements, emphasizing the role of institutional informality in shaping access to services, and showing the plurality of governance actors involved in environmental management and service provision.

In summary, the integrated framework of historical exclusion, institutions, and local relations proposed here does not currently exist in the literature. The current study demonstrates their intersection and usefulness in analyzing access to environmental services in marginalized communities, contributing to the development of urban political ecology. Moreover, examining the intersection of urban political ecology with environmental justice and providing data on environmental racism is valuable for examining the lack of access in countries where the legislation prohibits outright exclusion. Finally, the shifting focus from predominantly urban environments to rural and semi-urban settlements, along with how informality and the multitude of actors involved shape access to services, constitute further contributions to the field.

7. Conclusion and future developments

7.1 Overarching conclusion

In this final section, the results of the whole thesis are condensed, from its empirical chapters to its discussion. The aim is to provide readers with a concise synthesis of the study's empirical findings and its contributions to the field of urban political ecology.

Lacking access to environmental services among Roma communities in Neamț county stems from intertwined historical, institutional, and social factors. The Roma have been experiencing marginalization ever since they arrived in Europe, ranging from slavery, forceful sedentarization (during the communist era), and active administrative exclusion.

Following recorded and oral histories, the forcibly sedentarized Roma of Neamț county were settled in marginalized locations, where marginalization presently continues through their proximity to natural protected areas, flood-prone areas, and distance from the city infrastructures. Voluntarily settled communities also chose marginal locations, replicating ongoing social structures and relations, and following a similar fate of a lack of service provision. Communities living in areas that are either flood-prone or part of a natural protected area often lack tenure over their land and homes. This legal documentation is needed to secure access to services; therefore, in essence, populations living in marginal locations are unable to access them.

Legislation does not include affirmative provisions for marginal communities; as a result, their informal character puts them outside the reach of law-mandated service delivery. Additionally, electricity is not among the services required by law to be provided. The complex landscape of public and private actors involved in service provision further complicates the process of securing access. However, some well-meaning local authorities (town halls) provided services beyond the mandatory minimum, positively impacting livelihoods. In contrast, others limited themselves to simply complying with the law (while providing access to majoritarian Romanians living in similar conditions).

Roma acutely perceives inequalities in access to services. This gives rise to a variety of responses, from ostracizing themselves further and seeing themselves as completely different people from majoritarian Romanians, to trying to cooperate with them. They perceive that the institutions' willingness to help greatly influences outcomes, motivating them to collaborate with their local governmental authorities. Roma see themselves as marginalized, and secure service provision by themselves as much as possible (in this study, this involved water and sewerage systems). There were cases of vandalism, protests, or disrespect towards publicly provided goods and services as a form of pushback against the overall exclusion they experience. This, in turn, heightened social tensions and reinforced the existing social hierarchy, reducing the authorities' willingness to continue trying to secure access to services.

All in all, this section summarizes the study's main findings and showcases the historical, institutional, and social mechanisms underlying unequal access to environmental services. However, several areas remain insufficiently understood, and so they will be expanded upon in the following subsection, outlining potential directions for future research and theoretical development within the field of urban political ecology.

7.2 Future developments

This subsection focuses on future research developments arising from the literature review and on the limitations of the current study.

Urban political ecology needs to be more inclusive in addressing the differences between formal and informal processes affecting service provision. Future development of the field should address gaps such as the role of non-governmental actors, the divergence between law and practice, and the integration of environmental perspectives to make analyses more inclusive and relevant for policy (Gandy, 2022). Thus, further research is needed in these directions to provide a clearer perspective on the factors involved in service provision.

The intersection between the three dimensions studied, namely, how local relations and history affect institutional behavior, needs further research. This study found that institutional

goodwill plays a significant role in service provision; therefore, the factors shaping such behavior warrant deeper investigation.

Finally, this study would have had more reliable conclusions had the community sample been larger. This thesis served as a first exploratory study of Roma in rural Western Moldavia; therefore, more communities (both Roma and non-Roma) in urban, suburban, and rural environments need to be observed. Studying different environments would help reveal the factors that lead to differences in access to services between rural and urban areas in Western Moldavia. Access to services beyond those studied in this research could also provide a more complete view of the current situation.

While this subsection outlined potential directions for future research and theoretical development, building on these findings, the following subsection addresses practical considerations to improve access to services in marginalized communities.

7.3 Practical recommendations

This section presents practical recommendations for governmental authorities and service providers. These were based on personal experiences during fieldwork, suggestions from the interviewed authorities, and insights arising from the three analytical dimensions developed in this thesis.

During the research, I encountered well-intentioned authorities who were reasonably frustrated by the seeming lack of progress. However, despite past failures, the researcher recommends that they not give up on their efforts to ensure a better life for marginalized people, as bringing about lasting change might take several generations. Still, it is crucial to the well-being of the entire Romanian population. This is because the effects of persistent historical marginalization cannot be undone within a few years. Moreover, fragmented communication between population segments can be improved only slightly during a typical term of office. Therefore, continuous efforts spanning across several terms of office are needed to bring about visible change in the Roma communities.

At the same time, authorities should focus on mapping the areas where marginalized communities live and proactively think about the implications of their legal designations. For instance, ApaServ did not even acknowledge the existence of the Vânători-Neamț Roma communities, referring to a different geographical area when asked about them. Moreover, while the studied Roma communities did not feature on the official informal community list, they were regarded as such during interviews. It became clear that authorities should better account for the county's topography and allocate resources to develop and expand a utility network that serves the entire population, regardless of ethnicity or social status. Moreover, stronger institutional collaboration would improve coordination between governmental and non-governmental institutions, increasing the likelihood of securing access to services.

During the review of Romanian legislation regulating tenure and access to basic environmental services, there was a stark lack of positive action to provide these services. Without positive action, centuries of historical marginalization cannot be undone, and local relations are not taken into consideration by law. Therefore, policy should be modified to actively take into account marginalized populations when securing access to services, as they face greater barriers than the majoritarian population.

Finally, to shield these established communities from natural hazards and bring them within the protective reach of legislative action, river-course regulation needs to be implemented. This effort yielded easier access to tenure and, therefore, to public services in other counties, according to the sanitary mediator. Thus, in cases of established communities in dangerous areas, this is a course of action that would also benefit the majoritarian population by reducing flooding risk.

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APPENDIX 1: Interview questions for the civilians

Romanian version

- *“Sunteți mulțumiți cu curentul electric din casa dumneavoastră? Aveți pană de current frecvent? E scump curentul? Știți unde e panoul electric în casa dumneavoastră? Îl verifică cineva din când în când?”* -> electricity
- *“Aveți apă la robinet? Toată ziua? Caldă? Potabilă?”* -> drinking water
- *“Aveți toaletă/WC? Unde – în casă, în curte, altundeva? Ce fel de toaletă e? Câte persoane o folosesc? Vă simțiți confortabil când o folosiți? Unde vă spălați? Aveți cadă, duș, sau folosiți o găleată? Aveți încălzire și apă caldă atunci când vă spălați? Unde spălați rufe?”*
-> wastewater
- *“Unde aruncați gunoiul? Cât de des e dus gunoiul în afara localității? De către cine? Ardeți vreodată gunoiul?”* -> waste removal
- *“Ziceți-mi despre viața dumneavoastră. Ce s-a schimbat în jurul dumneavoastră din copilărie, și ce a rămas la fel? Când s-au petrecut aceste schimbări? Ce dificultăți au adus aceste schimbări?”* -> establishing a timeline and opening the discussion on environmental services
- *“Ce credeți că vă poate îmbolnăvi împrejurul dumneavoastră?”* -> sanitation and overall safety
- *“Ce vă deranjează în viața de zi cu zi de acasă?”* -> open question aiming to discover inconveniences

English version

- *“Are you satisfied with the electric current in your home? Do you frequently have power cuts? Is electricity expensive? Do you know where the electric panel is in your home? Is anyone checking it from time to time?”* -> electricity

- *“Do you have water on tap? Subsequent questions: The whole day? How about hot water?”*
-> drinking water
- *“Do you have a toilet/WC? Where – in the house, in your yard, somewhere else? What kind of toilet is it? How many people use it? Do you feel comfortable when you are using it? Where do you wash yourself? Do you have a bathtub, shower, or do you use a bucket? Do you have heating and hot water when showering? Where do you do laundry?”* -> wastewater
- *“Where do you throw garbage? How often is it taken out of the commune? By whom? Do you ever burn garbage?”* -> waste removal
- *“Tell me about your life. What changed around you since your childhood, and what remained the same? When did these changes happen? What difficulties did they bring?”*
-> establishing a timeline and opening the discussion on environmental services
- *“What do you think can make you ill in your surroundings?”* -> sanitation and overall safety
- *“What is bothering you in your daily life at home?”* -> open question aiming to discover inconveniences

APPENDIX 2: Interview questions for the authorities

Romanian version

For ApaServ

1. Puteți să îmi spuneți de când sunt conectate comunele Vânători-Neamț și Crăcăoani la sistemul de canalizare și furnizare a apei?
2. Cum funcționează colectarea apelor uzate în aceste zone?
3. Cât de des este apa de la robinet potabilă în aceste localități? Există monitorizări periodice ale calității apei?

4. Cât de des apar probleme cu sistemul de canalizare sau cu alimentarea cu apă? Cum sunt acestea gestionate?
5. Cine a comandat proiectul de conectare la rețelele de apă și canalizare? Cum au reacționat locuitorii la inițierea acestui proiect?
6. Care au fost principalele provocări în furnizarea accesului la aceste servicii? Ce obstacole au apărut în timpul implementării proiectului?
7. Cât a durat construcția infrastructurii necesare? Cât de dificilă a fost această construcție și cine a finanțat-o?
8. Cât de dificil este să mențineți calitatea serviciului? Cu ce probleme vă confrunțați în acest sens?
9. Ce credeți că s-ar putea face pentru a îmbunătăți sistemele de alimentare cu apă și canalizare din zonă? De ce resurse ar fi nevoie și cine ar putea contribui la implementare?

For the County Council, Town Halls, and the County Prefecture

1. Puteți să îmi oferiți o perspectivă asupra istoricului acestor comunități, în special în ceea ce privește formalitatea lor, demografia și accesul general la servicii publice (apă, electricitate, internet, salubritate, servicii de urgență)?
2. Cum au fost afectate comunitățile de apropierea sau distanța față de zonele industriale? Care sunt cele mai apropiate astfel de zone și ce impact au asupra localnicilor?
3. Ce ați făcut, ca autoritate, pentru a asigura accesul acestor comunități la servicii publice? Care au fost principalele provocări pe care le-ați întâmpinat?

4. Care au fost opiniile publice, atât din interiorul, cât și din afara comunităților, legate de extinderea accesului la aceste servicii? Ați întâlnit rezistență sau sprijin din partea cetățenilor?
5. Ce tip de reclamații ați primit în legătură cu aceste comunități? Dar aprecieri? Puteți oferi exemple concrete?
6. Cum supravegheați activitatea din aceste comunități? Faceți verificări periodice? Dacă da, ce aspecte monitorizați în mod specific?
7. Ce credeți că s-ar putea face pentru a îmbunătăți monitorizarea și sprijinirea acestor comunități? Cum ați putea obține mai multe fonduri pentru acest scop?
8. Cum se manifestă interesul dumneavoastră pentru a sprijini aceste comunități?
9. Ce date considerați importante pentru studiul meu? Aveți alte informații relevante pe care mi le puteți pune la dispoziție?

After part of the fieldwork, these are some extra questions that became relevant:

- What do you think are the community's biggest problems?
- Open-ended questions regarding access to water and electricity

English version

For ApaServ

1. Could you tell me since when the communes Vânători-Neamț and Crăcăoani have been connected to the sewage and water supply system?
2. How does wastewater collection work in these areas?
3. How often is tap water drinkable in these localities? Are there regular monitoring checks of water quality?

4. How often do problems occur with the sewage system or water supply? How are these issues managed?
5. Who commissioned the project to connect the water and sewage networks? How did residents react when the project was initiated?
6. What were the main challenges in providing access to these services? What obstacles arose during the project's implementation?
7. How long did it take to build the necessary infrastructure? How difficult was this construction, and who financed it?
8. How difficult is it to maintain the quality of the service? What problems do you face in this regard?
9. What do you think could be done to improve the water supply and sewage systems in the area? What resources would be needed, and who could contribute to implementation?

For the County Council, Town Halls, and the County Prefecture

1. Could you give me an overview of the history of these communities, especially regarding their formality, demographics, and general access to public services (water, electricity, internet, sanitation, emergency services)?
2. How have the communities been affected by their proximity to or distance from industrial areas? Which are the closest such areas, and what impact do they have on locals?
3. What have you, as an authority, done to ensure these communities' access to public services? What were the main challenges you encountered?
4. What were the public opinions, both inside and outside the communities, regarding the expansion of access to these services? Have you faced resistance or support from citizens?
5. What kind of complaints have you received about these communities? What about positive feedback? Could you provide concrete examples?
6. How do you monitor activity in these communities? Do you carry out regular inspections? If yes, what aspects do you specifically monitor?

7. What do you think could be done to improve monitoring and support for these communities? How could you secure more funding for this purpose?
8. How does your interest in supporting these communities manifest?
9. What data do you consider important for my study? Do you have other relevant information you could share with me?

After part of the fieldwork, these are some extra questions that became relevant:

- What do you think are the community's biggest problems?
- Open-ended questions regarding access to water and electricity

APPENDIX 3: Use of generative artificial intelligence

Generative Artificial Intelligence was used sporadically to improve tasks that would otherwise translate to a long-term commitment. All the generated outputs were thoroughly checked and adapted, and no text was copied without changing it, other than the questions used in the interview for authorities, for which ChatGPT was used purely for translation. ChatGPT was also used to provide synonyms and cultural translation through the process. Generative Artificial Intelligence was absolutely not used to provide help in the literature review process, as it is known to be inaccurate in this regard.

The cover picture was created using ChatGPT image generation and Adobe Photoshop. Specifically, three images were combined into the final result. The prompt and conversation can be found at <https://chatgpt.com/share/67ebb924-2c28-8002-aae0-eb8ae618e925>.

Finally, I used three services (ChatGPT, DeepL, and Google Translate) to translate the interview questions for the authorities from English to Romanian, comparing the results to generate my own version. The ChatGPT thread can be seen at the following link:

<https://chatgpt.com/share/67ebb8c5-a5cc-8002-973b-355021ca92e9>. The same was done with the consent form: <https://chatgpt.com/share/67ebb896-9248-8002-8b02-768848642061>.

Non-generative artificial intelligence was used through Google Translate (for translating specialized terms, where needed) and Grammarly (which was used to improve the thesis's grammar and punctuation).