



Romanian workers in the Czech forestry sector: a follow up

Simina Guga

Abstract:

This article comes as a continuation of a previous text, published in March 2011, describing the situation of some Romanian workers who were exploited in the Czech forestry business during the first half of 2010. This article is based on a series of interviews conducted in Romania in July 2011 with workers, public institutions and some companies that were connected to this case. It aims to describe the changes in the recruitment strategy after the closure of the PBM Union Jobs office in Targu Mures, the actors connected to this story, as well as the living and working conditions of some of the workers in the Czech Republic.

One of the findings from our previous research was that a significant percentage of forestry workers who were brought from Romania to the Czech Republic were ethnic Hungarians, mostly from the counties of Mures, Harghita and Covasna. This is the main reason why we¹ decided to continue with our research in this area, trying to get in contact with different groups and listen to their stories. The more we wanted to get a hold of the big picture, the more our focus had to expand, including hundreds or even thousands of Romanians who had experience with temporary work in the Czech Republic. For the purposes of our research, we focused on people who were recruited from rural areas and small towns in Covasna and Harghita county, as well as on some other actors who were involved in this process (transportation companies, local recruiters described by the workers, etc.)

The recruitment of workers

Compared to findings from earlier this year, the information we found this summer gives us a clearer picture of the different strategies used in the recruitment of Romanian forestry workers, from a quite transparent process (offers published in the local newspapers and a

¹ Simina Guga and two other researchers.

registration office) to more **obscure** ones, based more on personal encounters with the workers in the villages across different regions.

After the scandal that involved the main recruitment agency PBM Union Jobs in Targu Mures and the investigations that were made regarding its activity by the Labor Inspectorate and The Brigade for Combating the Organized Crime, the company closed its gates in summer 2010 when the director of the company, **Marta Pavelová**, left the city.

Still, she remained in Romania and participated in the recruitment of workers from villages in Covasna and Harghita counties, introducing herself to the workers as an employee of the Czech parent company employing the labor force.² People remember hearing about her from others in different villages, where she, together with another Czech/Slovak man,³ was travelling in order to promote the employment offer for the Czech Republic.

During the process of recruiting workers, the Czech company was counting on different actors, involving **local recruiters** (ex: C.H. a woman believed to be from Odorheiu Secuiesc), or people who were in the process of being recruited themselves, and who were asked to spread the news about the generous offer to others in the area they knew might be interested.

The rumors spread fast as the recruiters were travelling from village to village, talking to key people in each location, leaving leaflets at local stores, publishing announcements in local Hungarian newspapers and arranging meetings with interested people from each community. These meetings took place only few days after the recruiters had first visited the village and were conducted by either “Marta” (Pavelová) or the local recruiters. The situation they were presenting was not identical, but very similar from one location to the other. They needed as many workers as possible—both men and women—who would be available for work in just a few days time. The employer was offering accommodation, money for food and free transportation from Romania to the Czech Republic. In case the workers stayed for more than 3 months, the costs of travelling back home would also be reimbursed. In comparison to the workers recruited in spring 2010, which paid recruitment fees of 150 – 450 Euros⁴, this time **no recruitment fee** was required.

The main task would be that of cutting trees in Czech forests, nine hours a day with a one-hour lunch break, for six days a week. Although some of the villages were known for having a tradition in working with wood, qualifications or previous experience in forestry were not required. The promised wages varied from 1200 euros to 1700 euros/month⁵, according to the strength of the worker and his/her ability to reach and even exceed the imposed quotas.

² According to workers who met her in their villages, between June and August 2010.

³ The identity of this man was not known by any of the workers.

⁴ <http://www.migrationonline.cz/e-library/?x=2281275>

⁵ In some villages they promised wages between 1200–1500 euros/month, in others 1500–1700 euros/month, and so on.

The recruiters confessed to the people they were recruiting that they had been paid 50-80 euros for each worker, their own interest being that of recruiting as many people as possible.

The departure from Romania

A few days after these discussions took place, several buses and minibuses came to take the workers. Too many people were interested in job offers in some villages, so not all of them managed to leave at the same time. Some of the groups got a direct bus to the Czech Republic, while others had to change buses in Budapest, where they were picked up by minibuses of the Czech employer or of other Hungarian or Slovak companies. Every 2-3 days, some minibuses arrived, bringing back workers and taking new ones.

From nearby towns, some buses were also made available for transporting the workers from the villages. These buses were sometimes commissioned from local Romanian transportation companies and workers remember that one driver from Baraolt (Covasna county) complained that the drivers did not get paid for their services. Another bus company from Cluj-Napoca faced a similar situation, ending up being partially paid, supposedly, for the transportation services they provided to the Czech company.

Work in Czech Forests

Romanians were working in groups divided across the country, in areas like Šumava National Park, the Krušné hory Mountains (the Ore Mountains) or Krkonoše National Park, etc.— where accommodation and working conditions differed slightly from one place to another, but the employer was the same company: Wood Servis Praha, who was probably indirectly⁶ subcontracted by Less and Forest.

Once at their destination, people were usually hosted in pensions and lodges that were rented out to tourists during the winter. Four to eight people shared a room, and several rooms would have to use a common kitchen and toilets/showers. People were usually satisfied with the **accommodation**, their only problem being that they always had to queue up for using the kitchen or the bathroom.

Compared to the ones we wrote about in the previous article, the groups that worked during the second half of the year received some safety and protection **equipment**, but boots, gloves and helmets were not made available by the employer from the start. For these, they were told that 150-200 euros would have to be deducted from their wages for which they would be reimbursed upon ending their contract and returning to Romania.

⁶ Wood Servis Praha was not subcontracted directly by Less a Forest but most probably subcontracted indirectly via another company Madera Servicio s.r.o. Although they don't have enough evidence yet, the Initiative for the Rights of Migrant Workers believes that this information is correct.

Although all workers were initially told that their job was that of **cutting trees** and wood, at the destination they realized that some of them would also have to **debark the trees**—a job they considered to be much more demanding than regular cutting. According to the type of work they had to do, most workers received a chainsaw weighing approximately 14 kilograms. For most people, it was the first time they had ever seen such debarking tools and they did not know how to use them at all. Even for the ones who had some previous knowledge of woodcutting, using such tools was a new experience, which they considered to be a dangerous one. Still, everyone had to learn how to use a chainsaw and work with it on a daily basis.

Regarding the **schedule**, the workers realized that instead of 9 hours/day, 6 days/week, as promised, they had to work for 7 days/week, waking up at 4AM and coming back to the dormitories no earlier than 6PM, and sometimes even as late as 10PM.

People were transported from the dormitories to the forest in overcrowded cars and sometimes in sealed containers, without windows, lacking any sources of light and air. The lunch breaks got shortened to only 30 minutes, and for rainy days, people received a rain jacket instead of a day off. Due to the schedule and the very limited number of facilities, they did not get a chance to buy/cook proper meals in the evenings or to dry their wet equipment, which they nonetheless had to wear daily.

The workers were **constantly watched** by supervisors – either Slovak or ethnic Hungarians from Romania – who, even when they were not working, were constantly pressuring the workers to be faster and more efficient. The reason behind this, they said, was that they needed to put the logs into the custody of rangers, and then only after, the Czech state would give them money for wages. Workers complained about the lack of communication with the Slovak supervisors who were always saying “*robota, robota,*” but due to the language barrier, were unable to communicate with the workers. In some cases, the labor process was videotaped by the supervisors who said that if the big boss (Martinák⁷) saw the tapes and thought that they were not working hard enough, the workers might be in danger of getting fired.

With the help of the rangers, the supervisors distributed **daily tasks** for each group. Each worker had a **quota** according to the place where they were working and the type of work they were doing. Each woodcutter would be assigned 0.5 to 0.7 hectares/day, while the peelers had to go through 10 cubic meters of wood/day. Only the supervisors measured the quotas, and the workers complained that, even though sometimes they reached the quota, they were forced to work more.

⁷ In case the workers had signed contracts with Wood Servis Praha, it is supposed that Martinák was a representative of the employer, or even the director of the company.

Apart from this, workers believe they were occasionally surveyed by Less and Forest helicopters flying over the forest and by Martinák and his bodyguards, who would carry out inspections in the dormitories.

Only people from one group remember having been given training in **labor protection and first aid**, but most workers were not instructed in how to use the equipment, nor how to create safe work environments, or what to do in case someone gets injured. In some areas, the hills were very steep and workers remember “*there were times when someone was cutting a tree uphill and we were downhill, and that person would just whistle or shout for us to move away so that we don’t get hit by the falling tree.*” The workers believe they were exposed to too many dangers, which they had to learn to avoid on their own, instead of being prevented and instructed.

While performing their work, people found out that the trees were contaminated by some insects/beetles whose bites were believed to be poisonous, and some of the workers who got bitten could not work anymore. Others fell victims to **work-related accidents and diseases** such as: being hit by a falling tree, injuring parts of the body with a chainsaw, back pains due to overexertion, the flu, pneumonia, bone problems from wearing wet clothes in cold weather, etc. **Injured people** did not get proper medical care, and it was then they realized that health insurance was not actually provided and that the promises made by the recruiters and the Czech boss were false. After they became “useless,” or if their medical condition was bound to worsen, they would be sent back to Romania, usually receiving some money in compensation for the work they had done before the accidents had taken place. But there were cases when “*some injured people did not receive any payment for their work because they were told that medical care was very expensive, so they would not get any money for what they had worked*”. In one case, when a worker cut his toe, “*because he did not have medical insurance, he was left on the corridor and the supervisor had to pay 5000 Czech crowns in order to get basic medical assistance. This person was sent back, but his wound kept bleeding for 3 days. [...] Someone else was hurt by a chainsaw and his wound got infected. He was sent back to work and after that was sent back to Romania.*”

Faced with situations like these, people realized the importance of having a labor contract and of understanding the clauses that might have an impact on their work conditions and rights. But most people did not even see a contract until they organized a protest and threatened to stop working unless their situation is regulated by a firm contract.

The strikes

Experiencing difficult working conditions and having to deal with the uncertainty of their situation, as people doing a dangerous job without having a labor contract and medical insurance, and without a guarantee that they will be paid for the work they are doing, most groups of Romanian workers got involved in organizing or participating in strikes, refusing to work, asking for immediate payment and better working and living conditions. They focused

primarily on several of the **main issues**, such as: having a day off every week and working less hours per day, having time to buy food and having access to proper facilities for cooking, having an extra set of equipment and a room where they could dry their clothes, getting paid for the work that was done by the time the strikes had started, getting a labor contract and medical insurance, etc. Soon after they stopped working, Martinák—“the big boss”—, together with his bodyguards and a translator, came to speak with the workers, reiterating the promises of a good wage and the possibility of earning more if they exceeded the quota. The wages were not as high as they had been promised before coming to the Czech Republic, but nonetheless they were still convenient—ranging from 800 to 1200 euros/month.

At that time, the workers were forced to sign **contracts** in the Czech language. *“We asked to have a translation of the contract but we were told that it was not possible and that we either signed it on the spot or we would be sent back home,”* recalls one of the workers. In some cases, the workers never saw these contracts again after they signed them. Compared to the previous groups from the first half of the year, when the contracts were signed with the company Affumicata, the main employer for the second half of 2010 was Wood Servis Praha. No details concerning neither the contract length nor payment were written on the contract. Only after checking the type of contracts used in the Czech Republic, we discovered that the workers had signed a special kind of contract designed especially for temporary work that would last no more than 150 hours in total, and for which the employer wasn’t required to pay for any social benefits for its employees.

Payment

By the time they had to return to Romania, none of the workers had received the money they were expecting from the work in Czech forests. Still, the ones who stayed for shorter periods received some payment while the ones that stayed longer were usually abandoned, without money for food and without any proof of employment.

As mentioned before, in the summer of 2010, people were leaving Romania on the same buses that were bringing injured workers back home. At first, we were intrigued by the **poor communication** between villagers, since it seemed that they did not talk to one another about the working and payment conditions of the forestry job. But we found out that people who came back first *“were paid something...not 1500 euros, but 500 or 800. Still, there was an explanation for all these deductions, so that new workers did not believe they would not get paid. And even for those who took 500 euros...that was a lot of money for them.”*

While working in Czech forests, some people realized that the work was too hard and that they might not get any payment, so they pretended to be sick and asked to be sent home, knowing that by doing this, they would get at least part of the money to which they were entitled. One time, after the strike/protest, when people asked to be paid some money in advance, Martinák went to a bank in the nearest city, *“took the money, put them on top of his car and simply started asking how many days each person had worked...and this is how*

much money we got.” In the end, some people managed to receive part of their wages, while others did not receive any money at all.

Each worker received 1000 CKZ for food every week, but there were cases when people stopped receiving this money and had to go on strike, or to find other strategies, like using less petrol for the chainsaw and spending some of the money on food, or eating wild plants they would find in the forest. When the 1000 CKZ stopped coming, it usually meant the workers were abandoned and would soon be kicked out of the dormitories.

All the workers who managed to get to this point had to find their own way back home, usually with the help of some colleagues or their families. Some people called “Marta”—the woman who recruited them and who was sometimes in contact with the workers—but she said they should talk with the supervisors. When the workers accused her of deceiving them, she asked them not to call her again. Other groups were told by either by Martinák or the supervisors that the company had gone bankrupt or was on the verge of bankruptcy, and because of that, they would not receive their money. At one point, there was no one to talk to the workers anymore, so they realized they had been abandoned.

Strategies for pressuring the workers

Most of the workers confessed to feeling constantly supervised and intimidated in a number of ways. The most common strategy concerned the treatment they received from the supervisors—the insults, the video-taping and the threats, the pressure that was put on them to work faster and, in some cases, the impossibility to talk to the supervisors in a common language. The best workers would sometimes be invited for a drink with the supervisors, which led to divisions emerging within the workers’ group.

On the other hand, it was Martinák who, along with his armed bodyguards, would pressure the workers into signing contracts they did not understand, threatening that they would be sent back without payment if they didn’t work hard enough. At the same time, the workers knew that if someone complained about anything, that person would be moved somewhere else or fired on the spot.

Injured people were either forced to continue working, without receiving proper medical care, or they were fired and sent back home. In some cases, the workers themselves were threatened or were put in situations that they considered dangerous. One of the many examples is the story of a supervisor who was nice to the workers and then, according to them, got beaten up by Martinák. On another occasion, 14 workers went into Martinák’s room to tell him that they wanted go back to Romania, but he asked his bodyguards to take one of them outside. His colleagues got scared and defended the worker so that nothing happened in the end.

Some people thought of **filing a complaint with the police**, but they did not receive any support from them. One group that was working close to Železná Ruda remembers that one night, the police organized a raid and checked everyone's IDs and passports, but when people complained they had been abused, the police did not react and told them that *“if you don't get paid that is a problem that they had to solve with their employer”* and that they were only there to check if people were staying in the country legally.

Regarding the encounters with the police, workers recalled when a worker would drive a car too fast, the police would call Martinák who would call the driver and tell him to take it slower or he would receive a fine. Or if a worker was stopped by the police and did not have any ID with him, that person would just say that he was working for Martinák and would be allowed to leave without further questioning or fines. Also, when some of the workers were kicked out from where they were living, the police told them they couldn't help them in any way.

Because of all these situations the people lost confidence in the police and in any authority that would listen to their complaints and would be open to supporting them in resolving these matters.

The departure

“The ones who stayed longer were the ones who were cheated most,” acknowledges one of the workers whose colleague had worked in Czech forests for more than 5 months. The ones who left because of being injured or because they did not want to work there anymore received part of their money for which they had worked. But the ones who stayed until the end, hoping they would be paid, found themselves in the situation of being abandoned, without either work or money for food, and eventually got kicked out from their accommodation and had to pay for their way back home on their own.

Having had a bad experience with the police, some of them tried to get in contact with the Romanian Embassy in Prague. One of the workers asked his brother-in-law to call the embassy and, after describing the situation, they recall being told *“to leave as fast as they can, because otherwise they⁸ would come with minibuses or jeeps and they would beat them up. They knew about other similar cases and they said that they had heard about this situation for a long time and were looking for these guys [...]. They told the workers not to do anything because if they did, they might get their house in Romania burnt down by the Ukrainian mafia.”* Also, the person who called the embassy was *“told not to go to the police because they didn't have contracts and they could go to jail or that they'd be expelled from the country, that they'd just take them and leave them on the other side of the border of Germany and leave them there”*.

⁸ They were referring to the employer or “mafia” that was related to the employer.

Not having received any concrete help from the police or the embassy, workers came back to Romania. A considerable number of them claimed health problems, back and bone pain because of the hard work, as well as injuries due to the dangerous working conditions. Some of them filed complaints with the local police and, in some cases, they are still being investigated. Although people are not afraid of the potential consequences, most of them have lost hope that such a case will be resolved in their favor and that they will receive compensation.

For many of the workers, this was their first experience with migration, and for almost all of them, it was the first time they had been to the Czech Republic. The economic situation on the local level left many people unemployed and limited their perspectives to only two options: subsistence agriculture and temporary jobs, or migration. They went along with the verbal promise of good wages that would ensure a decent standard of living for themselves and their families for a while, until they could find another opportunity for earning money, which would, most probably, involve a new migratory experience.

Meanwhile, the Czech companies continue recruiting new Romanian workers in 2011. Multiple announcements on the Internet are directing the workers to different recruitment agencies that are willing to present the detailed job offer only after charging a mediation tax⁹. Unfortunately, even without this information, we see that the announcements are almost identical to the previous ones.

The article was written as a part of the “The System of Immigrant Work Controls in the Czech Republic: Inspiration needed” project which is kindly supported by the Embassy of the United States in the Czech Republic.

The Open Society Fund Praha kindly supported Siminas Guga’s investigative research in Romania about the issue of Romanian workers in the Czech forestry sector.

⁹ When discussing to an employee of one of these recruitment companies, I was told that they signed a confidentiality agreement with the Czech employers and they can’t reveal their name until the potential worker pays the mediation tax and receives the official job offer.