The Brothel Phone Number
Infrastructures of Transnational Pimping in Eastern Romania

Trine Mygind Korsby, Stanford University

Abstract
Taking a point of departure in negotiations for access to a phone number for a brothel abroad, the article demonstrates how a group of pimps in Eastern Romania attempt to extend their local business into the rest of the EU. The article shows how the phone number works as a micro-infrastructure in its own right, providing an entry point into the wider infrastructure of transnational pimping. The pimps’ embodied certainty of how to operate successfully in their neighbourhood in Romania is produced in resonance with the local, urban materiality. This interplay generates body techniques, which in turn cultivate and maximize uncertainty about themselves in others. When making the move to go abroad into unknown terrains, accessing the infrastructure generated by the phone number can provide certainty and consolidate one’s position within criminal networks abroad. However, at the same time, mishandling the phone number can be dangerous and in that sense produce new doubts and uncertainties.

Keywords: body, criminal livelihoods, infrastructure, pimping, Romania, transnational crime

Pimping is the main job for us here in Galaţi. It is the city of pimps [oraşul peştilor] in Romania. A few guys started it and saw how good it was, and then everybody said to their girlfriend: ‘Come, let’s go!’ So that’s what I am doing. It’s what we are all doing.

These were some of the first sentences uttered to me by my next-door neighbour, 22-year-old Alex, during my year of fieldwork among sex workers and pimps in the industrial city of Galaţi in Eastern Romania. The pimps among whom I conducted my research are most often in romantic relationships with the women in their business, and being a pimp means facilitating and managing other people’s sex work and getting a share of what they earn. Often the earnings are very small, and generally my informants struggle to get by in everyday life; their dreams of hitting the big jackpot abroad usually remain dreams. Despite the fact that most of my informants also engage
in other criminal activities, such as credit card fraud, scams and theft, they mainly refer to themselves as having an occupation as pește, which means ‘fish’ in Romanian and is slang for pimp. The pimps and sex workers do work locally, but they all aspire and aim to take their business abroad to countries such as Switzerland, Spain, Germany and Italy, where larger amounts of money can be made than in Romania. Their home turf, Galați, is thus first of all a site in which they prepare for transnational pimping and sex work, as well as a landscape they can return to when business abroad fails. Intimately associated with this urban home is an elaborate and fine-tuned constellation of techniques of the body (Mauss [1934] 1992), which support my informants in their livelihood by both providing and protecting an embodied certitude about how to move oneself successfully in this landscape by maximizing uncertainty in others (Korsby 2015: 41–75).

Pimping is a business, then, that requires a wide range of interpersonal skills, both when it comes to gauging the motivations and desires of others and in terms of negotiating with them, whether prospective sex workers, clients or other pimps. As in any other line of business, one needs the right skills to be a successful pimp. The capacity to expand one’s business abroad is an important such skill, since the potential financial gain is significantly larger abroad. But which social and material conditions need to be in place in order to make transnational pimping happen? Can we identify elements within the organization of pimping that play particularly important roles in this expansion into new and foreign contexts and landscapes – elements which in this respect provide new insights into how transnational pimping works? In this article, I address these questions by focusing on a specific such element – or indeed ‘infrastructure’ – that plays a vital role in what might be called the wider infrastructure of transnational pimping, namely the phone numbers for good brothels abroad. One might think that the contact details of a brothel could be found online, but, as I will show, accessing this kind of information and successfully turning the connection into fruitful collaboration involves a delicate dance within an established local hierarchy, which the pimps have often been part of since childhood in different groupings and smaller gangs in their neighbourhood.

One could ask why the phone number and not some other object serves as a lens into the workings of transnational pimping. As will be unfolded below, the reason is the great significance that the pimps attributed to this phone number: it was vital for their transnational business success, as it was one of the few concrete building blocks that could make their dream of hitting the big jackpot abroad materialize. By honing in on the phone number as a key component of a wider infrastructure of transnational pimping, we can thus gain new anthropological insights into how the pimping business reaches beyond the local neighbourhood into illegal landscapes abroad (cf. Star 1999: 381). In this way, the phone number is a sort of magnifying glass that illuminates wider questions of transnationalism, criminal hierarchies and illegal business operations in a post-socialist context. As I aim to show, analysing transnational pimping through brothel phone numbers – and the array of possibilities and obstacles that the hunt for this scarce resource gives rise to – sheds new light on the certainties and doubts pertaining to the pimping business.
The phone number is my primary focus in this article, but to fully understand its importance within the wider infrastructure of transnational pimping, I must first introduce the national and local context, namely the working-class, urban neighbourhood and quintessential post-socialist infrastructure in which my informants live. Through one infrastructure we will thus get to understand another. As such, my analysis in this article operates with three levels of infrastructure: (1) the phone number as a micro-infrastructure; (2) the urban materiality of a working-class neighbourhood in a post-socialist city; and (3) the wider infrastructure of transnational pimping, guided by desires for migration, life improvement, specific material objects, romance and sex. I thus apply the concept across different scales, acknowledging that these scales themselves are generated via the work that infrastructures do. By analysing the phone number as an infrastructure on a micro-scale and paying special attention to the wider effects, practices and relations branching out from it, we gain new insights into the business processes, originations and networks of transnational pimping.

The following analysis proceeds in two stages. Firstly, I will demonstrate how the pimps navigate in their local, post-socialist, urban infrastructure in order to produce successful pimp bodies, capable of instilling uncertainty about themselves in others. Secondly, I take a look at the pimps’ initial attempts at taking their business abroad with the use of the phone number, which I argue does infrastructural work by adding the pimps to a network and an established infrastructure of the pimping economy abroad, thus continuously changing – cutting, expanding and moulding – the infrastructure that it is part of.

**Micro 50**

The steel factory that sits majestically on a hilltop overlooking Galați, pumping grey smoke out over its inhabitants, was built in the early 1960s (Turnock 1974: 285–287; 1986: 233). During Nicolae Ceaușescu’s socialist rule, the factory employed almost fifty thousand people, and in the 1970s and 1980s people used to travel to the city from all over Galați County (județul Galați) to work at the steel factory. But those days are over, and today the tendency is to leave the city to go abroad rather than migrate to it. After the country’s transition to a market economy, the steel factory was privatized, and today it only employs around six thousand people, which – among other things – has resulted in high unemployment rates in the region. In contrast to socialist times, where the state ensured everyone a place to live and a job, many low-skilled workers are unemployed in today’s Romania (Kideckel 2008). Since joining the EU in 2007, many Romanians have therefore travelled abroad in the hope of making money and improving their life situation, and Romanian migration figures have been among the most rapidly growing in Europe in recent years (Anghel 2013: 1, 4).

In the 1960s and 1970s, several new neighbourhoods were constructed for the steel factory workers. One of these neighbourhoods was Micro 50, where Alex and my other informants live. Micro is short for microraion, which was officially installed in Romania as the basic planning unit of the socialist city (Maxim 2009: 9–10). A microraion is a residential area enclosed by streets with heavy traffic or railways, constructed during socialist times as a response to rapid urbanization, according to exact regulations of...
area size (typically between ten and sixty hectares), access to public service buildings and easy access to public transportation (Maxim 2009: 10; White 1979: 239).

Alex’s apartment block looked like all the others in Micro 50: it was grey and rectangular, with five floors of four one- or two-bedroom apartments on each floor, and the harsh, recognizable smells of cabbage and sewage dominated the stairwell. There were grass areas with trees and little pathways connecting the blocks – important elements in the socialist urban ideology in order to promote healthy air and offer a pleasant environment in the leisure time of the working masses (Humphrey 2005: 52). In some places, the apartment blocks were placed close to each other, leaving only very narrow passageways (tronsoane) between them. Another pimp, 27-year-old Andrei, and I would walk fast, squeezing ourselves sideways in the tronsoane between the tall, concrete walls, with him correcting me: ‘Walk faster, watch out, be quiet’. Walking in Micro 50 was not something you could just do, he explained, not so much because it was dangerous, but because there was a special way that one should move in this terrain. Andrei put it this way: ‘You need to know where it is safe and good to go, and how to go there. And I don’t mean how to actually get there, anyone can do that. I mean to go there in the right way’.

During my time in Galați, Andrei meticulously instructed me on ‘how to move myself’ (cum să mă misc), in order to stay out of trouble. This has to do with how one pilots and holds one’s body in the landscape: how to walk, stand, lean and run. From watching Andrei and the constant alertness and focus in his eyes, as well as moving around with him for a year, it became clear that ‘the moving of oneself’ was not only about the actual, concrete movement of one’s body from A to B; it was also about getting an overview of the situation by making a reading of the landscape and its possible hindrances and dangers – an ongoing topographic mapping. When spending time with the pimps, I noticed their vigilant ways of assessing and paying attention to people and changes in atmosphere. Vigilance was an important skill for Andrei and the other pimps, since having a heightened attentiveness to one’s surroundings, as well as the ability to read other people, was central when installing illegal devices on ATMs or assessing whether a particular person could be a prospective sex worker or a possible target for a scam.

However, this cultivation of vigilance as a social, ethical and political skill for everyday life has a longer trajectory in Romanian society. Even though vigilance within a criminal environment has a unique character tied to the risks involved in illegal activities, it is worth noticing that vigilance or attentiveness was a virtue needed to map out the agendas of others that pervaded Romanian society on several levels during socialist times, for instance through the workings of the Secret Police, Securitate, and its large number of informers.7 This incorporated people intimately into the project of the state, which created suspicion between people and mistrust in the political system (Kligman and Verdery 2011: 450–451). This ideological vigilance called for by the Party gave rise to another kind of vigilance: an attentiveness to the vigilance of the surroundings in order to avoid being informed on – a vigilance towards vigilance, so to speak, in the form of an ability to evade a highly attentive and often non-localizable gaze, which can be compared to the attentiveness that the pimps showed towards the people around them. To the pimps, being vigilant – including about other people's
vigilance – was part of their embodied certainty of how to move themselves ‘the right way’ in Micro 50.

Moving oneself this way was thus a body technique that could be learned (cf. Mauss [1934] 1992). It even included one’s facial expression, and several times my interlocutors would correct me, noting that my face was ‘too open’ (prea deschisă) when we met people in the street. Andrei tried explaining this to me: ‘If you walk around like that [widening his eyes and smiling exaggeratedly], people will look at you. Too much, I mean. It is an invitation that you don’t want to give. It is better to stay on your own road, and not have people looking in.’ Here Andrei was underlining the necessity of not inviting strangers into your own space – an intimate space, which can be accessed if one’s face is too open, thus inviting people’s gaze into an area of the self and the body where it should not be. The facial expression should be controlled: being too open, it could get in the way of moving oneself the right way, which for the pimps involved pushing others away from the interior domain and excluding them from ‘looking in’, as Andrei said. This produced a state of doubt, of not knowing, in others, which seemed desirable. Moving oneself in what the pimps considered the right way in resonance with the material landscape had the desired effect of generating opacity of oneself in others (cf. Robbins and Rumsey 2008). One’s inner domain was an arena that one should contain and not let strangers into – a fact of which the pimps were convinced, knowing the potency of being able to read other people’s desires and motivations. This was a skill they themselves cultivated and performed, both with prospective sex workers whom they wished to recruit and with prostitution clients who wished to buy sexual services from their employees (Korsby 2015: 77–105).

So, what did this way of moving around in Micro 50 look like on an everyday basis? Andrei would always walk in front of me down the narrow pathways between the blocks, and we would constantly meet people he knew, mainly other young men with similar puffed jackets and jeans. He would greet them with a quick toss of the head and then shake their hand. Often, we would just stand with them for a little while, smoking outside an apartment building, not talking. The cadence of our high-speed walking rhythm was also interrupted when we met someone who owed him money, or if we saw someone affiliated with powerful pimps other than Doru, the 31-year-old former right-hand man of a local mafia boss with whom Andrei had been friends since he was a child. In those cases, Andrei would steer us around another corner or make sure not to catch the other person’s eye. The mafia boss had been stabbed to death a few years back, but Doru’s influence had remained strong in the city, and Andrei’s affiliation with him placed Andrei in possible opposition to other ‘big fish’ (peşte mare). The narrow pathways between the blocks provided excellent passages of retreat in those situations, but the confined space could also contribute to an escalation of a situation. As Andrei told me, he was once halfway through one of the exceptionally narrow tronsoane when he met the older brother of someone whom he had recently beaten up severely. Looking back, he saw an elderly man carrying several large plastic bags, thus cutting off any possible escape. In this case, the narrow pathway forced Andrei to submit to a revenge beating, being literally squeezed between two grey apartment blocks.

The pimps knew which of the stairwells of the apartment blocks were the best to meet on, if one needed to discuss things that one did not want others to hear. And they
knew which parking lot was the best to check out girls from, if one was planning to find a new girl to travel abroad with for sex work. For instance, I soon learned that the parking lot close to School 62 was a good location, with its open views and a stream of high school students passing by. Knowing where to go and whom to ask for, to get the best and most correct information on brothels abroad, or to borrow larger sums of money, was essential to Andrei and the other pimps. They manoeuvred easily in the neighbourhood’s complexity of social relations and places; they fitted in, and they knew how to use the material layout of the neighbourhood for their business of negotiations and initial meetings with prospective sex workers. In many respects, there was room for the pimps in Micro 50. People knew about their hustling and pimping business, and even though it was sometimes morally disputed in private, the big fish in particular were also well respected for their ability to solve local problems, lend money to people in need, and create social mobility in a neighbourhood haunted by unemployment (cf. Ries 2002: 278; Roitman 2006: 249–250, 260, 264; Van Schendel and Abraham 2005: 4, 18).

However, the pimps also stood out, deliberately sharpening the differences between themselves and the local florist or the kiosk owner in Micro 50, for instance by having coffee at the only fancy café in Micro 50, Café No. 10, with women whose feminine appearance – in terms of makeup, high heels and daring clothes – was expressed in a completely different way in comparison with other local girls. In this way, the pimps thus simultaneously ‘bulge out of’ and ‘contract into’ everyday life in Micro 50, with their simultaneously attractive and frowned-upon strivings for a financial quick fix abroad. On the one hand, they were part of and accepted in the neighbourhood, where they were also neighbours, sons, fellow gamblers, churchgoers and hopeful breadwinners. On the other hand, they also stood out: they transgressed borders of legality, legitimacy and notions of shame or disgrace (ruşine) through explicit attention-seeking markers, such as BMW or Mercedes-Benz cars – if they were successful – and fake gold watches and necklaces.

In this first part of this article, I have shown how the body techniques needed in the pimping economy have their roots in the material and social infrastructures of Micro 50, which are made out of apartment blocks, kinship networks, narrow pathways, friendships, disputes and smells of sewage. To Andrei and the other pimps, one’s interior domain is not opaque to others, but should be trained to be so: what makes engagements in the public sphere potentially risky is that one’s interior domain can be accessed if one does not apply the appropriate body techniques. In the meeting between the pimps’ bodies and the spatial and social infrastructures that they partake in, certainty and uncertainty are thus simultaneously generated. This is the infrastructure that the pimps know and master, and through which they achieve embodied certainty of how to navigate, via well-honed and vigilant body techniques and techniques of facial formation, used with the intention of cultivating and maximizing uncertainty in others.

But what propels the pimps onwards, away from Micro 50 and into new terrains in the rest of the EU? What enables their actual progression into taking their pimping business abroad, where the hope is that luck will strike them and they will hit the big jackpot? As suggested at the start of this article, one critical object that encapsulates
how a transnational pimping infrastructure can be built up and continuously generated is a phone number. I was introduced to the importance of this particular phone number early during my fieldwork, so I was able to track the ramifications and the conflicts, connections, journeys and movements it created. In what follows, I explore the phone number as a potent object and matter of concern – or indeed an infrastructure in its own right – which captures something important in the field, as a condensation of central issues at stake for my informants (cf. Stavrianakis et al. 2017). By following the phone number, we can trace how local networks are built and sustained, how they stretch into other European countries, and last but not least, what can go wrong in the process of initiating one’s career in transnational pimping.

The phone number

Alin: Yes, hello? [in English]
Laura: Hello, who is this?
[the phone crackles]
Alin: Hello, my name is Alin; I have your number from Bogdan … one of his girls used to work for you.
[silence]
Laura: Ah okay, I see. We can speak Romanian.
Alin: You speak our language? Really? I am impressed. [in Romanian]
Laura: I learned from the girls. Why are you calling? [continues in Romanian]
Alin: I am calling because I want to come with my girl to Switzerland too.
Laura: I understand. I need some pictures.
Alin: Of course. I will explain everything to her. We will go together.
Laura: Good. You know that I charge 40% of what she earns, right? How you split the rest is up to you. You need to make some pictures of her where she looks sexy and then send them to me on Facebook. Then I will take a look. It is important that she looks good, there are many girls here at the moment, so there is strong competition.

This conversation played out between Alin, a 26-year-old pimp with previous experience of pimping women in Italy, and Laura, a Swiss brothel owner. I was sitting next to Alin, who let me listen in on his conversation through the speaker mode of his mobile phone. Having hung up the phone, Alin stopped his nervous fumbling with his fake diamond earring, lit a cigarette and smiled, relieved at seeing that the acquisition of the phone number actually paid off. Now there was real contact. The acquiring of Laura’s phone number had not been an easy process, and Alin had invested both time and money in finally being able to make this exact call. Now he could go ahead and buy the minibus tickets for him and his girl to go to Switzerland. Alin laughed and triumphantly waved his mobile phone in the air: ‘It is happening! We are leaving!’

The pimps were connected to each other in informal networks of loyalty, built out of childhood friendship and reciprocity. The right social relations, as well as a knowledge of how to navigate in these relations, were central to the success of the pimps. In order to steer clear of complications and move up in the hierarchy, the lower-placed ‘lover-boys’, such as Alin, needed unproblematic relations with the big fish. This entailed
respecting the business of the big fish abroad by staying within one’s line of local loyalty when in the destination country. The local hierarchies thus extended beyond Micro 50, Galați and Romania. As the name indicates, the lover-boys used elements such as love, care and devotion in their relations with the potential sex workers in order to make the project of going abroad happen. Often the pair had been a romantic couple for a while (up to several years), and they both regarded the journey as a common migration project (Korsby 2015). The pimps who were higher in the hierarchy – the big fish – were seldom involved in the actual recruitment of the women. The big fish worked at the management level of the lowlier pimps’ activities, simultaneously with managing other illegal activities both locally and abroad, such as cloning credit cards and organizing burglaries. Doru and others in his position helped lover-boys like Alin when they wished to leave Galați to engage in transnational pimping, for instance through access to crucial information on brothels, and other friendly connections who could provide protection abroad – information that could be earned or bought. In the lover-boy’s process of gleaning that information, which would enable him to plan the journey and leave, the lover-boy would also get the big fish’s approval for the trip: as several of them said, this was not only about leaving Galați in a smooth way but also about securing a trouble-free return. Respecting the mechanisms of the infrastructure of connections was vital in order to ensure that that happened. Playing with open cards as to one’s plans for leaving could thus – to some extent – ensure that one would catch the big fish’s attention in a mode of approval and recognition instead of provocation, when hopefully returning to Micro 50 a few months later with money and a shiny BMW or Mercedes-Benz.

Furthermore, the pimps knew that moving to a new country without an established network could leave them in a fragile position (Korsby 2015: 139–166). As Alin and other informants told me, placing a newly arrived sex worker in a random street in such a new setting, without prearranged agreements with people in charge, could be dangerous: someone in the established street economy was likely to react promptly and aggressively (cf. Milner and Milner [1972] 2010). Connections in the destination country – including the wished-for fragments of certainty on how to navigate there – were of high value.

This became clear during the days of negotiation over the price of the phone number that Alin ended up with. The negotiations had originally played out between Bogdan, the son of a powerful mafia boss in the region, and another pimp, Sebastian, who wanted to leave for Switzerland with a young woman he had recently met. Sebastian had decided to make this trip together with another pimp, Little-Victor, and Little-Victor’s girlfriend. According to rumours in Micro 50, Bogdan was in possession of the phone number for Laura, who was a reliable and well-connected Swiss brothel owner, and Sebastian had hoped that his lifelong friendship with Bogdan would be sufficient for the acquisition of the crucial phone number. It did not go quite as expected, however, and Bogdan was unwilling to assist, mainly because he did not know Little-Victor very well. Because of the involvement of an almost unknown partner in the plan, the friendship between Bogdan and Sebastian was thus far from being sufficient for obtaining something as valuable as this phone number. Bogdan – who had not lived up to his wealthy and influential father’s expectations and thus lived under poor
conditions with his mother, daughters and visually impaired wife – demanded one thousand euro for the information, an amount that Sebastian was not even close to having. They negotiated for several days, the three of us sitting in the shade in Bogdan’s dusty courtyard, with chickens and dogs running between our feet, smoking cigarettes and often not saying a word for long periods. Bogdan’s mother and wife would come and go, occasionally serving us the obligatory 3-in-1 Nescafé and offering their insights into the negotiation. Sebastian was getting desperate and became increasingly tense as the time passed. After a few days, Sebastian felt there was no other way out than to lie to Bogdan, and he told him that he and Little-Victor had quarrelled, and that he would be leaving alone with his girl, no longer with Little-Victor. After much persuasion and reassurances that Little-Victor was no longer involved in the journey and that Bogdan would be rewarded when Sebastian returned to Galați, Bogdan took a long look at Sebastian, got up and went into his house, and then came back with a small piece of lined paper with the important phone number written on it. He finally handed the phone number over to Sebastian, who shook Bogdan’s hand and quickly left the courtyard in order to start making his arrangements and put the phone number to use.

However, Sebastian continued his plans with Little-Victor behind Bogdan’s back. A week later, Sebastian and I were sitting in my apartment, listening to Parazitii [The Parasites], a Romanian rap and hip-hop group, when he received a phone call from Bogdan, asking him to come to the nearby football stadium. It was evening and therefore an unusual place to meet, and Sebastian was clearly nervous. When we got there, Bogdan was standing next to his brother-in-law, a well-known big fish from the Roma community, and they declared that they had learned of the deceit and that Sebastian was to pay the original price of one thousand euro to them instantly. Things tensed up. They negotiated over the amount, and to my great surprise they quickly came to a settlement of fifty euro – a significantly smaller amount. We left the stadium peacefully and a few days later Sebastian managed to borrow the fifty euro from me and his mother to pay his debt. He underlined to me that in the end, his long friendship with Bogdan was what prevented more severe measures being taken against him. However, despite his successful acquisition of the phone number, Sebastian eventually had second thoughts about leaving with his girl, and while he searched out other business opportunities within the illegal realm, he claimed fifteen euro by selling the phone number and the contact on to Alin, who was now sitting on the dusty doorstep of his apartment block, calling Laura for the first time.

It is difficult to determine where my informants’ transnational illegal activities ‘start and stop’, but focusing on the phone number’s importance in the making of the infrastructures that the pimps rely on, and following the ramifications of the phone number as they emerge, offers one possible answer. As pointed out in the introduction to this collection, infrastructures are objects and technologies, but they are also the systems on which other things – both visible and invisible – operate and grow. The phone number as well as the productive and unproductive relations and networks it generates, is a case in point. The phone number, comprising a series of thirteen digits, is a concrete material object, written with a pen on a small piece of greasy, lined paper – but it is also embedded in other structures and technologies (cf. Larkin 2013: 329; Star 1999: 381) in the sense that it is also part of a wider material network of telephone
masts, call centres and international phone networks of transmitters, country codes and areas of mobile phone coverage.

Following the introduction to this collection, one might ask why experimentally approaching a phone number as an element in an infrastructure (or even as an infrastructure in its own right) – and not merely as an object or a technology – is productive. In relation to the case of the phone number, the strength of infrastructure as a concept is that it opens up our focus on what lies beneath, beyond and between things. The phone number is the gateway into a network, and besides being part of a network of material infrastructures comprising telephone masts and call centres, it can be conceived of as a distillation of abstract and ‘larger’ social concerns of desire and migratory networks (cf. Sneath et al. 2009: 14). In other words, while the phone number is not a built network in itself (cf. Larkin 2013: 328), it works as one of the key portals in the creation of a network, by both revealing and generating it. As a sort of micro-infrastructure in the wider infrastructure of transnational pimping, the phone number plays a vital role in the continuous tinkering necessary to make the pimping business hold together and thus work, since connections are made through the phone number, and these connections allow for the objects and people involved in transnational pimping to move and create further relations. Tracing the journey of the phone number and the consequences of engaging with it therefore allows me to use it as an entry point into the wider infrastructure of transnational pimping. On a minor scale, the phone number encapsulates – and is part of continuously generating – how transnational pimping as an assemblage functions, and how the business of pimping moves, is hindered, rendered uncertain and rerouted in Galați.

By following the journey of a single phone number though the actions of Bogdan, Sebastian, Alin and Little-Victor, I have in this second part of the article demonstrated how access to this phone number closes and opens different roads to different people, showing how the phone number allows the pimps to extend – or prevents them from extending – their local networks abroad: networks built up over time in Micro 50, as friendships and through family ties. The phone number is a condition for the possibility for success, a way of moving ahead and making progress, but at the same time it can also be a hindrance and a decline if not handled correctly.

As the case of Bogdan, Sebastian, Alin and Little-Victor showed, accessing and productively using the phone number can provide certainty, expansion and consolidation of one’s position within the criminal landscape abroad, whereas mishandling the phone number can be outright dangerous. The phone number creates relations, but in different ways for different people at different times, and with different outcomes. The phone number for for Laura’s brothel is desired, but actually interacting with it can also be risky. As Susan Leigh Star has put it: ‘One person’s infrastructure is another’s topic, or difficulty’ (Star 1999: 380). In fact, as we have seen, the phone number does not always create smooth, progressive flows, but just as often breakdown, conflict and stoppage (cf. Harvey et al. 2017: 3, 8–9, 10, 13); it is indeed often an infrastructure of certainty and doubt at one and the same time.

This begs the question of why the pimps run the risk of entering into this infrastructure at all. Despite seeing numerous times how the dreams and imaginaries of other hopefuls in this line of business who ventured abroad were not fulfilled, the
pimps and their sex workers nevertheless had a strong belief in their common project and the possibility of changing and upgrading their lives forever (cf. Pedersen 2012: 137, 138, 148; Ries 2002: 295). And taking the first steps in materializing the hope that luck (noroc) might single them out, among the many others, was made possible through the phone number. Engaging with the phone number provided the pimps with a certainty – at least a momentary one – that the plan of upgrading their lives would be materializing: through the phone number they could imagine themselves and their place in the world in new ways (cf. Harvey et al. 2017: 3; Sneath et al. 2009: 11).

This suggests that the phone number is one of the centrifugal points of an infrastructure that creates passageways for the different flows of desire that push my informants into pursuing criminal livelihoods abroad: desire to improve one's life, desire to provide for one's family, desire for particular material objects, desire for migration, and desire for romance, sex and love. And all of those desires, in turn, are actualized by yet another desire: the sexual desire of prostitution clients in the rest of the EU. Having the piece of lined paper with the phone number in one's hand, dialling the phone number and speaking to Laura at the brothel concretely manifested those desires and carved out ways for them to be carried further: by reconfiguring and directing the bodies of pimps and sex workers, the phone number and its use functioned as a gateway into an infrastructure of desire.

What is more, each time someone enters this infrastructure of desire, it contributes to the continuous making of it, as it ramifies in different directions and to different effects, according to how it is used and by whom. As Brian Larkin puts it, an 'infrastructure is not just a technical object, but a language to be learned, a way of tuning into the desire and sense of possibility expressed in the very materials of infrastructure' (Larkin 2013: 337). The phone number expresses and actualizes 'the desire and sense of possibility' of a better life. The phone number connects the pimps to the rest of the EU and the hope of a more prosperous life, which so many young people in Micro 50 dream about: the notion that things could actually get better, that there is more to life. The phone number is a condensation of the prospect that Sebastian or Alin could potentially be the one to hit the jackpot abroad and return triumphantly in a shiny car, flashing a gold watch, ready to help upgrade the life of his family substantially.

In this way, the phone number thus operates as a ‘technology of the imagination’ (Sneath et al. 2009), a technology that starts off the imagination, opening up spaces of imaginative effects – intended or unintended. While such an analysis of a technology like the phone number as an imagination machine certainly is productive with regard to my ethnographic material, I argue that the phone number is not merely a technology that creates imaginative effects, but that it works in infrastructural ways too, insofar as the phone number is one of the generators – or centrifugal points – of the social and material networks that are part of the wider infrastructure of transnational pimping. The phone number works as one layer of larger networks, working alongside other ‘condensed infrastructures’, encapsulating, enabling, rerouting and disrupting the desires that flow in, to, through and from the bodies of my informants, in Micro 50 and into the rest of the EU. Each use of the phone number adds a new element to the making of the infrastructure of transnational pimping, a process that changes, boosts and distorts this infrastructure as people enter and exit it.
Conclusion

Let me finish by returning to the question of how the successful pimp body comes into being in constant interaction with the social and material landscape in which it is embedded. As we saw, by growing up and hanging around in their urban home turfs, a bodily certitude about how to move oneself the right way was instilled in the pimps, and one of the benefits of this embodied certainty was that it worked to cultivate and maximize uncertainty about one’s intentions in the eyes of others. This was what happened in Micro 50, where the body work that needed to be done was carried out in preparation for going abroad. Attempting to extend one’s locally embedded certainty to a new, unknown and therefore uncertain setting took the form of obtaining the right phone number. When the transitional move happens, the rest of the EU becomes yet another infrastructure to master, and some of the pimps had acquired extensive knowledge on legislation regarding prostitution and human trafficking within different European countries.

However, the reality of life abroad contained numerous obstacles. Despite being helped on the way by the phone number, the legal, social and material infrastructures of other EU countries demanded yet other skills and embodied knowledge that the pimps were challenged to achieve in this new setting. The fragments of certainty obtained through the phone number thus led to numerous new uncertainties, and the majority of the pimps struggled with establishing their business abroad. The consequences of entering the transnational infrastructures generated by the phone number thus also included disappointing and ‘coagulating’ potentials; many of the pimps returned to Micro 50 empty-handed and frustrated, but still ready to – once again – start negotiating for access, information and thus new possibilities for success abroad.

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Trine Mygind Korsby is a postdoctoral researcher at Stanford University, where she works on a project on transnational crime and criminal livelihoods in Romania. She completed her Ph.D. in anthropology at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. Her recent publications include Moments in Collaboration: Experiments in Concept Work, co-authored with A. Stavrianakis (Ethnos, 2016), and ‘In the Workshop: Anthropology in a Collaborative Zone of Inquiry’, co-authored with A. Stavrianakis and P. Rabinow (Routledge, 2017, in Nielsen and Rapport [eds], The Composition of Anthropology).
Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Some of the factors that generate transnational pimping and transnational sex work are structural conditions of unemployment and limited possibilities, mixed with romance, a search for adventure and the personal wish to upgrade one’s life (cf., e.g., Andrijasevic 2010; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Korsby and Limoncelli 2005; Korsby 2013, 2015; Korsby et al. 2013; Lisborg 2014; Plambech 2014).
3. My use of the term ‘infrastructure’ is in line with that of Harvey et al., who in a recent overview define infrastructures as ‘extended material assemblages that generate effects and structure social relations, either through engineered (i.e. planned and purposefully crafted) or non-engineered (i.e. unplanned and emergent) activities’ (Harvey et al. 2017: 5).
4. As Harvey et al. put it, infrastructures ‘produce some settings, situations or systems as large and others as small, but always with the potential for further transformation or reversal’ (Harvey et al. 2017: 17; original emphasis). My point is thus not that the phone number is a ‘whole’, vast network, mapping a ‘total’ infrastructure of transnational pimping, but rather that the phone number does certain infrastructural work in instigating, boosting and sometimes obstructing the transnational networks that the pimps navigate in.
5. From a total of 9.5 million jobs in Romania in 1990, only 4.1 million remained active in 2010 (Anghel 2013: 7).
6. Micro 50 is a pseudonym. In Galați the Micros are named up to Micro 40.
7. Securitate is believed to have relied on more than four hundred thousand informers (Deletant 1995: xiv; Verdery 1996: 24). Verdery and Kligman describe how ‘revolutionary vigilance’ towards other citizens – for instance towards any ‘class enemies’, such as the ‘chiaburs’, the rural bourgeoisie – was encouraged by the Romanian Communist Party during socialist times: “Working peasants” and workers were … warned to be ever vigilant, ready to unmask the chiaburs’ duplicitous deeds … Everyone was to be trained in the spirit of “revolutionary vigilance” (Kligman and Verdery 2011: 329).
8. By using the word ‘girl’ (fata), I am sticking to my interlocutors’ way of speaking about the women they have employed, as well as these women’s words about themselves. The word ‘girl’ does not refer to their age or level of experience, since several of them are adult women in their 20s or 30s, and for my part it is not used to project any notion of a ‘child-like’ or agency-deprived status onto them. I have chosen to use the words – ‘pimp’ and ‘girl’ – that my interlocutors use to describe themselves.

References


