Complex Intimacies
Sex Work, Human Trafficking and Romance between Italy and the Black Sea Coast of Romania
Korsby, Trine Mygind

Published in:
A Sea of Transcience

DOI:
10.3167/9781800737860

Publication date:
2023

Document version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Despite the sunshine, the beach area of the port city of Constanța is almost empty as I walk across the sand to meet with Ramona and her family. Constanța comes across as a slightly run-down, bustling vacation destination, beautifully located by the welcoming Romanian coast of the Black Sea. It has beautiful beaches with white sand and a huge, busy port, and the city is home to the naval academy, educating future officers for the Romanian naval forces. The enormous naval ships dominate the port, creating an air of grandiosity and busyness. There is something abandoned and at the same time hospitable about the atmosphere of the city, one reason being that I have arrived in the spring, outside the peak tourist season. However, some locals also say that the presence of the naval industry has had a detrimental effect on the city’s beaches, which has caused its attraction as a vacation destination to suffer.

Ramona smiles and waves at me, and her daughter Laura runs to greet me. Later on, having found a few abandoned beach chairs to sit on, Ramona repeats something to me that she has told me before. She looks lovingly at her daughter and tells me that becoming Laura’s mother was the single most important thing that made her move on in her life and start to heal the grief of losing her sister many years ago.

I know Ramona through my research on sex work, human trafficking and transnational pimping, and she is one of the young women whose lives I have followed since 2007. This chapter explores Ramona’s journeys between her hometown of Slobozia in eastern Romania,
Rome in Italy and Constanța by the Black Sea in Romania. Through Ramona’s story, including her reasons for establishing a life for herself in Constanța, the chapter explores the contested themes and categories of human trafficking, human traffickers and victims of human trafficking. Constanța, with its intriguing mixture of decay, beauty, history and industriousness, in many ways encapsulates Ramona’s continuous search for the interweaving of stability, fleetingness and adventure – for example expressed through the complexities of some of the intimate relationships that have shaped her life, which this chapter will illuminate. Based on her story, the chapter thus investigates some of the contradictions and complications that are part of the lives lived within the often-stereotyped categories related to human trafficking (Korsby 2015). Before I return to Constanța, my starting point for Ramona’s story are her experiences as a resident of a shelter for victims of human trafficking in Italy.

The Shelter in Rome

The last night I was in my country, I said to my mother, ‘See you tomorrow’, but then the next day, I left for Italy. I wanted to go. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I didn’t have any choice. My father and I didn’t have a good relationship, and after an argument, he kicked me out of the house. I didn’t know what to do. I met a guy, Cristian, and he told me that I didn’t have a choice. I knew the guy and his friends from my neighbourhood, and I knew their reputation … He said that I had to go to Italy and earn a lot of money so I could buy a house. And I wanted to do that, I wanted to take care of myself and create a life … But when I got here, things were totally different. I had to work on the street, the guy took all the money, he threatened my family, he hit me. I was really scared. After two months, I couldn’t take it anymore. I ran away and went to the police. After that, I came here, to the house.

This was what Ramona told me one of the first times we talked, which was while she was living in a shelter in Rome for minors whom the Italian state has identified as having been trafficked to Italy. At the time of that interview, Ramona was seventeen years old and had been staying at the shelter for less than a year. As she explains above, Ramona sold sex on the streets of Rome for a few months until she contacted the authorities and social services and ended up at the shelter, which is located at a secret address in a middle-class neighbourhood in Rome. The house can accommodate up to ten young women and functions as a home for them for up to two years. During my nine months of fieldwork at the house, there
were at the most eight women living there at any one time, all between the ages of sixteen and twenty.

This chapter is based on thirty months of ethnographic fieldwork, primarily in Italy and eastern Romania, which started in 2007 and is ongoing. My research started by focusing on young women working in sex work, their process of being officially identified by the Italian state as ‘victims of human trafficking’, and the relationships they have with the people who travelled with them to Italy and worked as their pimps – and who in some cases were later convicted as human traffickers. My research subsequently moved to focusing on the lives of the pimps and the human traffickers, focusing on their business models, moral landscapes and social relationships, and how they manage to extend their local pimping businesses in Romania abroad to other EU countries (Korsby 2013, 2015, 2017).

Ramona is originally from the outskirts of the town of Slobozia in Ialomița County (judetul Ialomița) in Romania, a two-hour drive from the Romanian coast of the Black Sea. This is where she met Cristian, who originally travelled with her to Rome, and who worked as her pimp for a few months. He was part of a larger group of young men working in this line of business, all of whom Ramona knew from her life in Slobozia.

The shelter is run by the municipality of Rome and a local NGO. The house is large, on three floors and with many rooms and balconies. There are bedrooms for the young women, along with a kitchen, a living room, a dining room, bathrooms, a roof terrace and the staff office. Some of the young women share a room, others do not. Their rooms are cozy and are decorated individually with posters of idols, pictures of boyfriends and other friends, beauty products and teddy bears. There is, however, a sense of emptiness in the house; there is not much furniture, and things are placed haphazardly. The sofa in the living room is worn and dirty. From the outside, there is nothing about the house that sets it apart from the other houses in the neighbourhood other than the fact that it is not as well cared for as some of the others. According to the staff, only a few of the neighbours know that the women are living there, but the young women themselves say that the whole neighbourhood knows.

According to the NGO, the purpose of the house is to help young trafficked women move on to an independent life on a personal level, including finding a job. The Italian state has identified all the young women in the house as victims of human trafficking. After working on the streets and getting into contact with the authorities, they were taken to a reception centre for unaccompanied minors, where their cases were assessed, before arriving at the house. Most of the young women testify in trials against their traffickers while living in the house.
Human trafficking has been a highly discussed topic on the international political agenda for years, and millions of euros have been spent in countering it. Human trafficking refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons - by force, coercion, fraud or some other form of deception - for the purpose of exploitation. Human trafficking implies exploitation of another person’s work, be it in sex work or other kinds of work, and the prison sentences for human trafficking are noticeably stricter than prison sentences for pimping or other kinds of third-party facilitation. Many critical academic analyses have been produced in recent years concerning the often moralizing or sensationalist misuse of human trafficking as a concept (see, e.g., Doezema 2000, 2010; Kempadoo 2005; Korsby 2015; Lisborg 2014; Plambech 2014). These analyses show that human trafficking is a serious phenomenon that must be tackled when it occurs, which makes national and international legislation on human trafficking absolutely necessary. However, the analyses also show that the concept has been watered down in many ways, for example by being used in sex work cases where it is not applicable, thus minimizing the agency and decision-making power of sex workers and portraying them as purely helpless victims versus their all-powerful pimps and traffickers. Yet, research in fact shows that the relationships between sex workers and their facilitators are far more complex and nuanced than these stereotypes suggest (Korsby 2015, 2017). Overall, a conflation between transnational sex work and human trafficking often seems to exist (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998), even though these are two different phenomena and two different legal categories.

My aim in this chapter is to present Ramona’s story to shed light on what entering, leaving and navigating within the vast, efficient anti-trafficking system looks like for my informants: a group of young women migrating mainly between Romania and Italy who have worked primarily as sex workers, and who have entered the Italian anti-trafficking system. My aim is furthermore to illuminate some of the complexities of the intimate and romantic relationships between the sellers of sex and their facilitators that may develop – also in cases that have been judicially ruled as human trafficking, within the legal system. Elsewhere I have described these intimate complexities mainly from the point of view of the pimps and the human traffickers (Korsby 2015, 2017), and the aim in this chapter is to illuminate these contested relationships with a point of departure in the young women’s experiences.

There is a strict framework surrounding the young women’s behaviour while living at the shelter, and when they arrive for the first time, they are required to sign a set of rules. This, among other things, specifies that they are required to be home at 7:30 PM every evening, that they must submit
a written application for permission to be out of the house in the evenings or at weekends, and that they may not disclose the location of the house to anyone. The house supervisor must meet their boyfriends, and ideally the staff should know at all times where the women are and with whom. The young women work outside the house as cleaners or hairdressing assistants, they attend Italian language classes and they go to school. In their free time, they go out with their friends and boyfriends, and some of them go to a fitness studio, the movies or the library.

Most of the women are from Romania, except one from Nigeria and one from Albania. The young women have different stories as to why and how they came to Italy, and not all of them have sold sexual services: one woman did a mixture of sex work, theft and fraud, while another did domestic work. Those women who had worked in sex work primarily worked on the streets, though one had mostly sold sex in an apartment.

The Pimps and the Sex Workers: Romance, Strategies, Teenage-Life – and the Anti-Trafficking Machine

The young women had different experiences of how they had met the people who made their journey abroad possible and eventually travelled with them to Italy. Ramona said:

I knew Cristian and what kind of guy he was. I knew him and his friends. But he was good at what he was doing, he knew so many people, and he had a lot of contacts. We went on a journey together ... It did not go well, and I suffered a lot, but when we left [Slobozia], I felt like it was an adventure. I felt like, now I could finally do something.

Often the young women had romantic and sexual relationships with the young men who travelled with them to Italy, and often they were only a few years apart in age. Most often, the young women had no prior experience in sex work, and in some cases they did not know that this was the kind of work they would be doing in Italy. Ramona explained that she knew she would be doing sex work in Italy because Cristian had talked to her about it, as well as telling her about the prices and details of working on the streets, but having no prior experience with this line of work, she did not know what to expect.

Another of the young women, eighteen-year-old Amelia, explained how she met Alex when she was sixteen years old. Alex was the man she had travelled to Rome with from the Romanian city of Galați (Korsby 2013: 134–35). They met at the local disco – he was older than her,
charming, and he had money. They became lovers, and after a short time, Alex suggested that she go with him to Italy to make some money. He took her out for dinner, bought her new clothes, showed her his family’s gold jewellery, and said he would protect her. Amelia clearly suspected that the work in Italy that Alex was talking about was related to sex work, but she never asked him directly. Instead, she persuaded her cousin, Lavinia, to come with her. When asked about her feelings for Alex, she said that she did not feel like she was in love with him, but that she could see what opportunities he could create for her (Korsby 2013: 134–35):

I never thought that Alex was a good guy. He wanted something from me. That’s the way it is in Romania, you know – that the first question you ask yourself, if anyone helps you, is what they want in return … He was one of the important guys in my town … We just used each other. Like a play. I knew that if I did not behave properly, like a good actor, then he could close the door to Italy. It was important for my life to leave. He had the power and the money. I really enjoyed the power he had.

Ramona and Amelia saw the opportunities presented to them through Cristian and Alex, and they decided to pursue them and to travel abroad, searching for better opportunities than their local landscape could offer them. Ramona and Amelia both come from eastern Romania, from homes that are struggling financially, and where at least one close family member is affected by alcoholism. Amelia’s childhood was marked by sexual abuse and violence, and often there was not enough money for food. Galați, where Amelia grew up, is the largest city in Galați County (judetul Galați) in the region of Moldavia. Moldavia is one of the poorest regions in Romania, and Galați County is the third poorest of the forty-one Romanian counties (Korsby 2015: 19; Pop et al. 2003: 18).

Two important components in Ramona and Amelia’s stories, as well as in those of many of the other young women, is on the one hand that they both had a significant conflict with a close family member just before leaving for Italy, and on the other hand, that they both described a deep longing for and curiosity about what the world could offer them outside the Romanian towns of Slobozia and Galați, where they grew up. Ramona and Amelia both dreamed about making money in a way that would provide new opportunities for themselves and their parents or siblings. In addition, ‘I wanted … adventure. I knew that there was more to life than this’, as Amelia put it when I talked to her recently. As a child in Galați, Amelia had dreamed of another life, and she buried herself in books at the local library. She tells me how she took books in Spanish, French, English and Italian down from the shelves and tried to decipher the meaning of
the words, even though she did not yet speak any foreign languages. She did excellently in school and got outstanding grades. However, she longed for something beyond her family’s cramped two-room apartment (Korsby 2013: 134).

When taking into account the previously mentioned academic analyses made in recent years regarding women in transnational sex work and the sometimes problematic use of the category of human trafficking, it is important to note this category’s role in our informants’ lives. When they started this journey, my informants were teenagers, most of them fifteen or sixteen years old. Legally this affects whether they fall into the human trafficking category, since being a minor makes an important difference in assessing whether a situation involves exploitation. When looking at Ramona’s and Amelia’s stories in the context of the academic literature produced on transnational sex work, many of the motivations and backdrops for migrating and entering into this line of work are in fact quite similar across age and region: for example, an acute crisis or conflict occurring in their lives, or a general desire to travel and make money and thus improve one’s own and one’s family’s life situations (see, e.g., Andrijasevic 2010; Brennan 2004; Plambech 2014; Skilbrei and Polyakova 2006). Nevertheless, teenage life is a different plateau to set out from compared to the situations of older women who set out to do transnational sex work, and whose incentives, relationships with facilitators and overall decision-making process might look different. Therefore, Amelia’s and Ramona’s plans, longings and imaginaries of adventure and of creating a better life for themselves might have looked different – and might have played out very differently when they arrived in Italy – had they been older and at a different stage of life. They might not have ended up as easily in situations that turned out to be transgressive, or situations that felt like they were ‘slipping out of their hands’, as Amelia once put it. This difference in age and experience not only affects their interpersonal relationships with clients, pimps and other women on the streets, or their relationships with family members back in Romania. It also strongly affects their interactions with law enforcement, NGOs and the whole anti-trafficking ‘machine’ – also referred to as ‘the rescue industry’ (Agustin 2007) – which works differently when assisting children and teenagers.

After their arrival in Italy, the atmosphere between Amelia and Alex changed, as Amelia discovered that Alex had many girlfriends working for him, one of whom ended up beating her up with a plastic pipe when she discovered that Amelia was putting money aside and not sharing all her earnings with Alex. One night, while working on the streets, Amelia ended up asking a client to drive her to the police, and that is how she ended up at the shelter with the other young women.
At the shelter, Ramona, Amelia and the other young women would sometimes share their thoughts about their home country, and their stories were often full of conflicting memories and feelings about where they came from. In Ramona’s words:

I get very sad when I think about my other life in my country … Now it feels like I’m struggling with two lives – the life I had, and the life I’m trying to create … And there’s a big conflict inside me … It is sad to lose a life and to be reborn, to create a new life. There’s a conflict inside me that I’m now trying to resolve.

None of them planned to move back to Romania, which Amelia and Ramona both emphasized to me several times. There was nothing for them there, Amelia said. In fact, both Amelia and Ramona planned to pursue work as hairdressers in Italy, a job they both enjoyed and saw great promise in. Amelia later succeeded in this career path, as well as passing her high school diploma with outstanding grades. She now works as a hairdresser in a popular salon in a European city while pursuing a degree in higher education.

However, despite her plans, life did lead Ramona back to Romania, where I reconnected with her a few years later.

‘It’s Not Rome’: Constanţa, the Black Sea and the Contested Intimacies of Human Trafficking and Sex Work

It is a burning hot spring day when I arrive in Constanţa for the very first time on the minibus (microbus). I am travelling from the city of Galaţi, where I am doing fieldwork, and on the long minibus ride all my fellow passengers agree that the windows must be kept shut because of the draft (curent), which is often blamed for a number of ailments in Romania. Hence, as we finally approach Constanţa, I am drenched in sweat and keenly looking forward to feeling the breeze from the Black Sea.

I have kept in touch with Ramona, and we have been texting intensively during the months I have been in Romania, but I have not seen her in person for almost five years. As the minibus pulls into the bus stop, I can see her waiting for me, sandals on her feet, her four-year-old daughter Laura holding her hand, and her boyfriend Vasile standing by her side. Vasile is tall, quiet and polite, and instantly offers to carry my bag.

Walking through the decayed grandiosity of Constanţa, one senses how this was once a busy resort town, full of tourists and comfortable resort hotels. I arrive in the month of May, so the vacation season has
not yet started, but I also understand from Ramona and my interlocutors in Galați that the true heyday of the town as a resort paradise was several decades ago, during Ceaușescu’s rule. Romania was under socialist rule from the end of the Second World War until December 1989, when a revolution broke out and the country’s leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, was executed (for more on this transition, see Verdery 1996). Since then, the political landscape in Romania has changed greatly, and Romania’s entry into the EU in 2007 was awaited with great anticipation by many of its population. However, in some ways EU membership did not live up to expectations, especially the hope that it would greatly reduce unemployment (Korsby 2015: 20). Since EU entry, therefore, many Romanians have 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). This recent period of Romanian history appears in the Romanian landscape as a uniquely beautiful aesthetic mix of long rows of worn-down, grey, concrete apartment blocks built in the 1960s and 1970s, EU-funded highways under construction, shining black BMWs, and farmers transporting their crops on horse-drawn carts.

There is a nostalgic and beautiful aesthetic of decay and memories, dust and industriousness, in the intersection of the worn-down resorts, the street dogs running loose and the huge naval port on the Black Sea at Constanța. Like in many other towns in eastern Romania, the pavements are full of huge holes, and aggressive street dogs dominate the atmosphere. I am the only person staying at the hotel I am checking into. At reception, they hand me the remote control for the TV in the room and carefully instruct me to return it when I check out. When I ask Ramona why, she looks at me with wonder at my ignorance: ‘So you won’t steal it, of course. You cannot just have something like that lying around in the room. People would steal it!’ she says. The room is meticulously clean and smells of bleach, but only one light fitting in the room has a light bulb. I can see the Black Sea from my window and feel the breeze from the sea. It is wonderful.

Over the following months, I travel from Galați to Constanța several times to spend time with Ramona and her family – as alluded to in my introduction to this chapter. The beach is beautiful, and Ramona, her daughter and I go for walks there. Sitting by the Black Sea one warm spring evening, she starts telling me how her life has unfolded since we said goodbye to each other at the shelter in Rome five years earlier. The sea is completely quiet, and we are the only ones on the beach.

After Ramona left the shelter, she kept working at a hairdresser in Rome. She really enjoyed her work, but then her male boss started
making inappropriate sexual advances to her. After a few months, it became unbearable for her, and she decided to quit her job and go back to Slobozia in Romania to visit her mother and brothers. Her plan was to stay in Slobozia for a few months and then return to Rome, where she still shared a room with a friend and had good connections at other hairdressers, confident that she would return and easily find another, much better hairdressing job. During her stay in Slobozia, Ramona reconnected with one of the young men who had originally arranged for her travel to Italy as a sex worker and against whom she had later testified in a human trafficking trial in Italy. I ask her about their reconnection and what it looked like, given their mutual history, the trial and its consequences for them both, and she says:

It is not like it is that easy. I knew what he and his friends were like. I knew what they could and what they could not do. And I really wanted to leave Slobozia. I have many regrets, and I suffered when we arrived in Italy, but... I have known him and his friends almost all my life. There is a history here. We come from the same place.

Ramona and the young man started spending more time together, and during that summer she became pregnant with his child. She was devastated, as her plan to return to Rome had to be postponed. She called her friend in Rome and told her to find another roommate, as she would not be coming back. Her mother was reluctant to help: the household was already struggling financially, but there was no other way. Ramona knew that she wanted the child, but the child’s father quickly announced that he would not be involved or contribute to the pregnancy or the childcare. In fact, Ramona explains that she knew already at that early stage of the pregnancy that she would have a daughter, and that it was ‘meant to be’, as she said – a daughter to relieve the pain in Ramona’s heart from losing her sister when she was only one and a half years old. Her sister died on Ramona’s birthday, and Laura – Ramona’s daughter – ended up being born on Ramona’s sister’s birthday.

Ramona pauses her story and looks at Laura who is playing in the sand, the sea calm and glittering behind her. Ramona sighs and pulls out her wallet from her bag, showing it to me, explaining that it was a gift from Laura’s father, a gift that she dearly cherishes and carries with her every day.

The gift encapsulates the complexities of the interweaving of intimacy, business, exploitation, care, law and belonging that play out in the relationship between Ramona and Laura’s father. Complexities which are often overlooked in the literature and general debates on human
trafficking, in which clear-cut categories of victim and perpetrator dominate (Korsby 2015). Elsewhere I have shown that the relationships between transnational pimps and transnational sex workers travelling from Romania to other European countries can entail love, romance and long-term commitment (Korsby 2015, 2017). Ramona’s story of being romantically and sexually involved with someone after testifying against him as one of her traffickers shows how complicated and multifaceted the intimate complexities in these relationships can be – also in cases of human trafficking.

Shortly after giving birth to Laura, on a trip to the Black Sea, Ramona meets Vasile. He is from one of the villages close to Slobozia and is in Constanța being trained as a naval officer. He falls for her, and she slowly opens up to him, she explains. And also, she adds, Vasile ‘doesn’t ask for much’ and lets her make most of the important decisions in their relationship – in contrast to her two brothers still back in Slobozia, who are ‘always so demanding’, as she says. Importantly, meeting Vasile was a welcome opportunity for her to start anew and stay clear of the layers of complications that her daughter – and her ties to her daughter’s father – potentially presented back home in Slobozia. Vasile’s prospects in becoming a naval officer were also very appealing to her: it seemed to implicate adventure and travelling. She started imagining a future for them, here in the Black Sea port of Constanța, among the enormous naval ships and the decayed resorts. ‘It’s not Rome, but on the other hand, Constanța is not Slobozia’, she says, and ‘that is good enough’.

**A Wedding and a Worry: Momentariness and ‘Next Time’**

I walk with Ramona and Laura back to the grey, concrete naval barracks by the port, where the family has a room on the third floor. Children are running between the barracks, and laundry is drying in the sun. In the corner of the room is a sink, a small mirror and a hot plate, and the wall behind the sink is painted in a strong turquoise colour. In the other corner there is an old and extremely noisy fridge. The toilet is in the hallway. There is almost no furniture in the room, only a mattress on the floor, covered with a thick green blanket with flowers on it, a tall wooden closet, and a series of colourful posters of the American singer Mariah Carey and the Mexican actress and singer Dulce Maria. A long piece of transparent white, embroidered cloth covers the window as a curtain. Two folded, fluffy blankets in dark red colours serve as pillows on the mattress. A dark wooden chair serves as the table for the family’s meals,
and we all end up sitting around the chair on the floor, eating the cake I have brought. I have also brought a Barbie doll for Laura, who rips the box open and happily starts playing with her doll. It is a local version of Barbie, called Vogue Show. Laura is charming, fun and joyful, always running energetically around, seeking her mother’s attention. Ramona is wearing golden earrings, jeans and a red top, revealing one shoulder. She recently had her thick, black hair cut shorter, and she checks her new look again and again in the small mirror. Then Vasile comes home; he is very calm and quiet, wearing dark pants and a knitted sweater in grey and white, to beat the chilly evening wind by the sea. He has no authority with Laura, who sulks and tells him off – it is clearly Ramona who runs the show.

A few days later, as we are hanging out in their room in the naval barracks, Ramona shares the news with me that she is pregnant with her and Vasile’s first child. She is concerned: how will they be able to provide for two children, she asks, her voice full of worry. This also means that they will have to get married – the sooner, the better. A few weeks later, she calls me to tell me that they are expecting a boy – joy overflows from her voice. ‘This is serious, it really is’, she says. When I return to Constanța the following week, we go looking at wedding dresses, but both Ramona and Vasile are quiet. As we walk along the port, flanked by the enormous naval ships, Ramona explains that they have no money for the wedding, so she will ask her mother for help.

Ramona knows no one in Constanța except for Vasile, and her loneliness becomes more and more palpable as the days go by in her early pregnancy. ‘This is just momentary’, she says to me on the phone a few times, ‘This is not where I am staying. Going back to Italy is still my plan’. Constanța as a place and a home for herself and her expanding family was constantly imagined and lived through – and seen in contrast to – her imaginaries and experiences of somewhere else.

Two months later, I attend Ramona’s and Vasile’s wedding in Slobozia. Their living quarters in the naval barracks in Constanța would not be suitable for festivities, so Ramona’s aunt’s apartment in Slobozia is chosen for the wedding celebration. We are twelve guests standing by their side, as they sign the matrimonial papers at the local courthouse. Ramona is wearing a beautiful silky dress in dark blue, her pregnant belly slightly noticeable despite the many thick layers of the dress. We take many pictures outside the concrete apartment block, with the summer heat as a heavy blanket over us. Ramona’s hair is beautifully arranged with blue and light-blue fake flowers, and she is wearing a white pearl necklace. Laura is running around happily in her pink tutu dress. Advised by my Romanian family – the family of one of my informants in Galați that in many ways
has taken me in as a daughter of the household – I give the newly-weds bedsheets and embroidered tablecloths as a wedding gift, which I have bought at the local market.

The celebration is short, and there is very little talking, but there are orange sodas and țuică (a Romanian spirit), and we all end up dancing in the living room of Ramona’s aunt’s apartment. Ramona’s uncle dances with Laura sitting on his arm, and she cannot stop laughing. There are colourful plastic flowers and fake peacock feathers in vases on the dresser in the living room, a poster of a spaceship up on the wall, and a heavy blanket in red, orange and turquoise colours covering the couch. Sweaty from dancing, Ramona sits down next to me on the couch, leaning over and saying: ‘Can you imagine – here we are! I am sure that next time I see you, we will be back in Rome’.

**Trine Mygind Korsby** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. She has researched the themes of sex work, pimping, human trafficking, transnational crime and criminal livelihoods in Romania and Italy since 2007. Her recent publications include ‘The Brothel Phone Number: Infrastructures of Transnational Pimping in Eastern Romania’ (*Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 2017) and ‘Object Exchange’, co-authored with A. Stavriankis (in *Experimenting with Ethnography: A Companion to Analysis*, Duke University Press, 2021).

**Notes**

The research for this article was supported by funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement #725194, CRIMTANG).

1. All names in this chapter are pseudonyms, and certain place names have been changed as well.
2. A ‘pimp’ is defined as someone who has procured, facilitated, managed or similarly contributed to commercial sex transactions. A pimp manages and makes money off another person’s sex work. During my fieldwork, the term ‘pimp’ and the equivalent of this term in Romanian slang was the term that was used by my informants, which is why I have accordingly chosen to stick to the term ‘pimp’ in my writing. Other, more academic terms such as ‘third party facilitator’ are unfamiliar to this group of people and is not how they define themselves (Korsby 2015, 2017).
3. The historical and geographical region of Moldavia used to be an autonomous state, but today the region’s western part is part of Romania, its eastern part is part of the Republic of Moldova, and its northern and south-eastern parts belong to Ukraine. In Romania, Moldavia is divided into smaller counties, which serve as the area’s administrative divisions.
References


