

# The Struggle for Anti-racist Environmental and Housing Justice: A View from a Militant Research Project in Cluj-Napoca, Romania

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## Abstract

This article presents the struggle for anti-racist environmental and housing justice in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and argues for militant research that provides knowledge and arguments to transform political thinking and practices. In discussing their activist research, the authors offer a methodological toolkit for activist knowledge production that might serve actions for social justice beyond the Pata Rât case discussed – a place in the city of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, where Romani residents are forced to live in proximity to toxic landfills. The article presents how a local movement, of which the authors are part, conducted multidisciplinary militant research to support actions against racist environmental and housing injustice. The article discusses different understandings of these concepts and describes the formation of the residential area and Romani residents' health conditions in the toxic environment of Pata Rât. The article also offers an interpretive synthesis of various types of empirical materials. In other words, militant research links environmental justice and housing justice via an anti-racist stance in the context of Romania. It stresses that without changing the structural conditions created by capitalism that force racialised people to live in polluted environments, legal recognition of housing and environmental rights will not mitigate intersectional injustice.

## Keywords

- Anti-racism
- Environmental justice
- Housing justice
- Militant research
- Pata Rât
- Romanian Roma

## Introduction

Our article is based on militant research conducted between 2021 and 2022 within the ENHOJUST project “For an Anti-racist Environmental and Housing Justice.”<sup>[1]</sup> It conceives militant research as an investigation that produces knowledge to support political struggles together with and on behalf of people whose critical condition it exposes.

As part of our inquiry, we aimed to critically address housing in a toxic environment through the particular case of Romani communities forced to live in the Pata Rât landfill area of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and provide analytical instruments for activism against racist environmental and housing injustice.

To understand the manifestation of intersectional injustice, we combined several perspectives: (1) a sociological approach to the (re)production of a residential area in the proximity of an urban landfill, (2) the legislative view on the right to adequate housing and the right to a healthy environment, (3) a medical perspective providing information about the health conditions of people living near the rubbish dump, and (4) measuring air pollution in areas deprived of adequate living conditions. Under ENHOJUST, we conducted militant research that produced knowledge to be widely distributed through a campaign that included media products<sup>[2]</sup> to increase awareness about the life-threatening effects of landfills on people’s health in a context where this is ignored (that is, the case of racialised Romani people). In addition, as part of the campaign, we shared a report<sup>[3]</sup> with decision-makers from different administrative levels in Romania<sup>[4]</sup> and international organisations, calling for a necessary change in environmental and housing policies, including special anti-racist measures.

While this article presents the results of the ENHOJUST project, it also argues for discussing militant research in the *Critical Romani Studies* journal. Additionally, it provides a methodological toolkit for activist knowledge production that might be used in political action for anti-racist environmental and housing justice, even beyond the scope of our case study.

The article is authored by some of the members of the ENHOJUST project: two scholars who are part of the Cluj-based Căși Sociale ACUM! (Social Housing NOW!) movement, in collaboration with a jurist

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1 Project implemented by Desire Foundation between January 2021 – June 2022, with the involvement of a team that included, besides the authors of this article, medical doctor Bogdan Mincu, engineer Alexandru Luchiian, and visual media professionals Radu Gaciu and István Szakáts, who facilitated translating research results into a media campaign for environmental and housing justice. The medical questionnaire was canvassed in the Romani communities of Pata Rât by Maria Stoica and Linda Greta, housing activists who formerly lived there.

2 For example, brochures, infographics, videos, and webinars. Available online: <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=4101>, <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=4121>, <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=3977>, <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=3991>, <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=3985>, <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=3965>, <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=3971>, <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=4157>, <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=4153>.

3 Available online: <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=4069>.

4 Available online: <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=4134>.

from Bucharest who is also an activist. It does not target academic readers interested in theory-building but rather militant communities where Romani and non-Romani persons interact in a common struggle to erase racialised intersectional injustice and make use of militant research to support their case. As such, we do not intend to further theoretical debates on housing injustice, environmental injustice, or manifestations of institutional racism and racialisation leading to them. Instead, we aim to contribute to thinking about transformative practices that go against these phenomena and illustrate how a multidisciplinary approach in militant research provides arguments in their support. Nevertheless, our conceptual perspective might also offer insights for academic researchers in addressing the housing and environment nexus from an anti-racist perspective critical of capitalism.

In the past decades, several research reports and academic articles have been published about the Pata Rât area of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, highlighting the injustices inscribed in a decade of habitation of more than 1,500 Romani individuals near the toxic landfills of an economically expanding city. These writings focused on discrimination, evictions, and racism (ERRC 2011; UNDP 2012; Amnesty International 2013; Zamfir 2022a, 2022b); residential segregation, marginalisation, and ghettoisation (Vincze 2012, 2013; Dohotaru et al. 2016; Picker 2017); the racialisation of labour, surplus population, space, and housing (Vincze et al. 2018; Vincze 2023); residualisation of social housing (Vincze 2024); and uneven territorial development (Vincze and Zamfir 2019).

Any focus on environmental racism against Roma in Europe and, in particular, in Pata Rât, is rare but not absent from the existing grey literature. Several initiatives were conducted around the time when we started the ENHOJUST project in 2021 (see initiatives of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and ERGO Network 2020; Civil Rights Defenders 2023; EEB 2024; EEB and ERGO 2024a, 2024b).

In the present article, we use the Pata Rât case to illustrate how the structural injustices of capitalism create instances when environmental hazards, inadequate housing, and precarious health are interconnected in the case of racialised Roma, adapting the concept of racist environmental and housing injustice to our context and call for action against it.

The following sections first clarify what militant research is and how we conducted it locally to support political actions against racist environmental and housing injustice. Second, we discuss how environmental justice, the right to a healthy environment, and the right to adequate housing are understood on a global stage by activists and international organisations, in Romanian legislation, and by our political demands. Third, we reflect on the formation of the residential area and people's health conditions in the toxic environment of Pata Rât landfills. Fourth, we discuss the empirical material from the prior sections in a synthetic, interpretive manner. In conclusion, we stress that the contribution of our militant research to existing approaches is that, on the one hand, it connects environmental justice and housing justice via an antiracist stance in the context of Romania; and, on the other, it understands that without changing the structural conditions created by capitalism that force racialised people to live in polluted environments, the legal recognition of housing and environmental rights will not eliminate racialised environmental and housing injustice. Additionally, we will formulate a few principles identified by our militant research that are needed to challenge racialised intersectional injustice manufactured at the crossroads of environmental and housing issues.

# 1. Militant Research for Housing and Environmental Justice

## 1.1 Understanding Militant Research

We subscribe to definitions that comprehend militant research “as the place where activism and academia meet” (Soob 2013, 6) and as an investigation that prioritises political struggle over the academic pursuit of knowledge (Adams 2023). Further, militant research “entails the researchers’ active and committed participation in the political movement of their subjects ... and involves their participation by conviction [...] and not simply because this conduct is an expedient way to get their data” (Ross 2013, 8).

Militant research has the potential to create forms of knowledge that can be used as instruments by the activist group of which the researchers themselves are part. The ENHOJUST project was designed to support the group’s political struggles by means of a sociological interpretation of the creation of the residential areas in Pata Rât, a process based on the affected people’s lived experiences and institutional documents; enquiring about the potential and limits of the legal perspective on housing and environmental justice; the medical survey gathered from these residential areas; and air pollution data collected with professional sensors at the sites. These endeavours provided knowledge about the problems that residents of Pata Rât face, including health-related issues, as well as arguments that can potentially increase the political power of people and activists to militate for an anti-racist environmental and housing justice.

## 1.2 Militant Research In and Against the Context of Environmental and Housing Injustice in Cluj-Napoca

The Căși Sociale ACUM! (Social Housing NOW!) movement<sup>[5]</sup> operates in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, where environmental movements barely address environmental racism when studying pollution or climate change. Here, housing activists learned to address housing injustice alongside environmental injustice because their actions supported Romani people forced to live near a toxic landfill. Since its existence, this informal movement has benefitted from the organisational and administrative support of the Desire Foundation. ENHOJUST militant research is an example of how knowledge, produced by activists with academic backgrounds, and people, affected by injustices who do not have time and energy for research, can provide arguments for a joint struggle. This case shows how, together, they can advance political thinking and action.

The movement emerged from a revolt against the forced eviction of 350 Romani individuals from a location in the city centre and their re-housing near the municipal rubbish dump on 17 December 2010. This revolt brought together those affected and persons who expressed solidarity with them. Since 2010, the initial consternation was channelled into jointly coordinated actions, such as street demonstrations

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5 Information about the movement is available online: <https://casisocialeacum.ro>.

and cultural events against evictions and for access to adequate social housing, support for people applying for social housing, court litigation, protests at Cluj City Hall, and local, national, and global awareness-raising campaigns about the causes and effects of marginalisation, segregation, and racialisation of Romani people, their labour, and the spaces where they make a living.

In time, a group consisting of Romani, Romanian, and Hungarian activists, some of them living in Pata Rât, began to address broader issues that city inhabitants with different socio-economic backgrounds face. Most importantly, we revealed how a lack of public housing, in conjunction with profit-oriented urban development, steadily has increased housing prices in the city. To support its actions, during the past 14 years, the movement conducted militant research on housing and property development-related issues and politicised people's lived experiences of injustice. From its inception, we addressed racism as an underlying dimension of the deprivations that Romani people face. In our writings and actions, we stressed that racism denies human dignity to categories of people inferiorised by majority society due to their ethnicity and socio-economic status and represents a constitutive element of their exploitation and dispossession.

The Desire Foundation managed ENHOJUST when a court case, initiated by this organisation and persons relocated from the city to the landfill area in 2010, was still running (ongoing at the time of writing this article). By then, its members were thinking about the need and possibility of submitting a new petition to the Romanian National Council of Combating Discrimination (which happened in 2022). These initiatives called for recognition that local and county authorities were responsible for placing two new temporary non-ecological landfills in 2015 in proximity to the housing area built by City Hall for Romani residents who were evicted from the city centre in 2010.

ENHOJUST demonstrated that racism not only marginalises and segregates but also kills by depriving stigmatised people of adequate life conditions, for example, by forcing them to live in toxic environments. In such cases, like Roma from Pata Rât, we can observe the features of environmental racism. Our militant research showed that environmental racism enables both the forced relocation of people to the vicinity of existing toxic sites (such as landfills and water treatment plants) as well as the construction of new toxic sites. Housing, environmental, and health policies driven by majority society work together to inferiorise, stigmatise, and disregard those individuals unlucky enough to live near these sites.

## 2. Environmental Justice and Racism, the Right to a Healthy Environment and Adequate Housing

### 2.1 Existing Approaches on the Global Stage

The concept of environmental justice (Schlosberg 2004; Schlosberg 2007; Boone 2008; Agyeman et al. 2016) dates back to the 1980s, and organisation around this topic was influenced by the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Initiatives in the United States asserted that underprivileged ethnic groups had the right to be protected from toxic environments. Later, the movement expanded geographically

towards the countries of the Global South and thematically to include several disadvantaged groups among the victims of environmental injustice and bring international environmental discrimination into the debate. Beyond the civic movements, legislative initiatives demonstrate that it is desirable and possible to regulate environmental justice from a legal standpoint, given sufficient political will. California State Assembly Bill No. 1628/2019 (State of California 2019) and the Aarhus Convention are examples in this sense (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2014). Additionally, in the 1970s and 1980s, environmental justice activists began to use the term environmental racism to refer to environmental injustice in a racist context (Pulido 1996; Holifield 2001; Pellow 2005; Seamster and Purifoy 2021).

The right to a healthy environment has facilitated the incorporation of the principle of environmental justice into the international human rights system. In October 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council recognised it. This right means an obligation for the state to control pollution, develop and implement legislation to protect those affected by environmental issues, and ensure environmental justice. The right to a healthy environment relates to other rights, too, including food, health, and water. The principle pursued by the right to a healthy environment is to resolve the adverse effects of the environment on human health, a departure from the conventional approach in the field which ignores the connection between a polluted/toxic environment and human health.

The right to adequate housing has been recognised as part of the right to an adequate standard of living in Article 25 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 11.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of 1966. Since then, other international human rights treaties have linked the right to adequate housing to the right to protection of home and privacy (United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing 2017). The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights has emphasised that the right to adequate housing must not be interpreted restrictively. Instead, it should be seen as the right to live somewhere safe, in peace, and dignity. The right to adequate housing is clarified mainly in the general observations No. 4/1991 of the Committee on the Right to Adequate Housing and No. 7/1997 on forced evictions. The freedoms included in the right to adequate housing are protection against forced evictions and the arbitrary destruction and demolition of one's home; the right not to be subjected to arbitrary interference with people's privacy, family, home, or correspondence; as well as the right to choose one's residence, place of residence, and freedom of movement. Other components of the right to adequate housing include security of possession, equal and non-discriminatory access to adequate housing, and participation in national and local housing-related decision-making.

## 2.2 The Right to a Healthy Environment and Housing in Romanian Legislation

By ratifying the Aarhus Convention through Law No. 86 of 10 May 2000, Romania presumed it would comply with and implement the convention through appropriate national-level measures (Romanian Parliament 2000). Arguments in this law include the need to recognise that everyone has the right to live in an environment conducive to their health and well-being and that citizens must have access to information, be entitled to participate in decision-making, and be able to have access to justice in environmental matters, as well as, when necessary, be assisted in exercising this right.

Regarding this, Romanian law stipulates, among other things, two key aspects. First, the state will not request any derogation from existing rights concerning access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters. Second, in the event of any imminent threat to human health or the environment, whether caused by human activities or natural causes, public authorities should immediately and without delay disseminate to members of the public who may be affected all information that would allow them to take preventive measures or mitigate the harmful effects of the threat. Revising Law No. 429/2003, decision-makers incorporated Art. 35 – the right to a healthy environment – into the country’s Constitution. As a result, since then, at least formally, the state has recognised the right of every person to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment, providing the legal framework to exercise this right.

In Romania, housing is not a constitutional right, but the right to a decent living is constitutional, and, theoretically, decent living should include a decent home. The 1996 Housing Law states that free and unhindered access to housing is the right of every citizen. Nevertheless, this access does not entail government obligations to provide people with a home; on the contrary, it can mean access to a home via the market, which is supposed to be achieved by people through personal effort unhindered by state policies. The same law provides that the local councils are responsible for social housing in the administrative-territorial unit to which they belong. However, it does not affirm that local councils would be obliged to offer an amount of social housing according to local needs. During state socialism housing was allocated to people related to their labour rights within a mixed housing regime (Vincze 2022), but in capitalist Romania neither the state nor the employers have any obligation in regard to the provision of adequate homes at affordable prices for workers or citizens. Access to a home is achieved almost exclusively via the market, which, given that less than two per cent of the total housing stock is social housing, creates a housing affordability crisis and housing, property, and wealth inequalities. People who earn the minimum wage and, in the expanding cities, even those who earn below average, have to seek solutions to high housing and rental prices, for example, “choosing” to live in overcrowded homes. Those who do not even have this option seek refuge in informal settlements with inadequate but cheap housing conditions.

### 2.3 Connecting Local and Global Demands in the Romanian Context

In Romania, housing rights/justice movements and social movements for environmental rights/justice exist and act in parallel. Claims about anti-racism, housing, and environment are formulated by separate civil society organisations and address different decision-making institutions. This is not the case for our local movement. By supporting the struggle of Romani residents forced to make a living in Pata Rât, the stake for us is to acknowledge the relationship between housing and environmental injustice and show how both result from the structural conditions created by a political economy regime which favours profit over people and the racialised practices of local authorities that endanger people’s health and lives.

Through the ENHOJUST project, we developed a composite concept of anti-racist environmental and housing justice from data on the housing and health conditions of Romani individuals living near the landfills. We used it as a basis for our political demands. The emphasis on the interdependencies of housing, environment, health, and various forms of social (in)justice is a complete novelty for Romanian policy, social movements, and even academic focus.

Our political demands are in line with the recent findings of the European Environment Agency (EEA) on the interconnection of environmental and social inequalities that contribute to the current debates on social and environmental justice in Europe (European Environment Agency 2019). The 2019 EEA report noted that local policy responses, somewhat reflecting the mainstream/traditional policies of the European Union, at best consider air and noise pollution from the point of view of the whole population. They neglect to address this issue from the perspective of disadvantaged groups or social inequalities, which are also manifest in inequality when it comes to the effects of pollution on such people. The EEA concluded that there is a need for environmental, social, and economic policies that address unequal exposure to the dangers of pollution and the unequal vulnerabilities of different groups. Then, it called for research to show who these vulnerable groups were and what categories of people need to be addressed through policies and actions. Our research, conducted in Romania in 2021, responds empirically and conceptually to this need.

Aligning with the EEA's view above, in 2020 the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) published the report "Pushed to the Wastelands: Environmental Racism against Roma Communities in Central and Eastern Europe" (Heidegger and Wise 2020). This report identified 32 cases in Central and Eastern Europe involving 150,000 people from Romani communities in Europe and found that Roma were affected by environmental injustice in three major ways: (1) they do not have access to services or have minimal access to clean water or waste collection, while surrounding areas benefit from them; (2) Romani communities are often constrained, in the absence of other alternatives, to live and work in degraded and polluted environments, in contaminated industrial areas, or areas exposed to environmental hazards such as floods; (3) Romani communities are victims of forced evictions from economically valuable locations that could provide them with access to natural resources such as uncontaminated land, water, and other utilities. Data from the ENHOJUST project represent the basis of our demands regarding health, housing, and pollution connected to the above phenomena identified by the EEB, which we presented to decision-makers in Romania.

Furthermore, our demands supplement several international recommendations regarding the right to a healthy environment and global environmental inequalities. As a movement, we bring the following matters to the attention of Romanian decision-makers. First, there is a need to adopt these neglected rights into the Romanian legislation and ensure conditions in which all people, regardless of their class, ethnicity, or social status, can access them, such as the right to a healthy environment and adequate housing. Second, there are strong connections between inadequate housing, poor health, and a toxic environment that demonstrate how the population's health status is influenced directly by their residential conditions and surrounding environment. Third, local environmental inequalities are related to inequalities based on where people can afford to live, and where they are forced to live, not only due to financial circumstances but also to lack of adequate housing and environmental policies, and institutional and everyday racism.

Our political demands consider that there is a need for a legal perspective on human rights; however, we also highlight the limits of the legalist approach. Economic rationales trump human rights in practical as well as legal terms. The political economy of waste as a valuable resource (Schindler and Demaria 2020) incurs direct costs and externalities imposed on racial lines. The mode of production based on

exploitation makes use of racialised labour, and the market-based housing system expels it to marginal and racialised places where workers can afford the costs of living or reproducing themselves (Vincze 2023, 2024). The case of Pata Rât is thus emblematic: racialisation proved useful for re-valuing centrally located urban land reclaimed by real estate capital through forced evictions and managing urban waste by destitute labour. Therefore, by focusing on concrete solutions to unequal housing, our demands aim to provide solutions that would advance the debate from the unjust distribution of ecological hazards (Faber et al. 2021) toward tackling the root causes of environmental racism linked to unjust housing and labour regimes in capitalism.

### 3. Residential Areas in the Environment of Pata Rât Landfills and People’s Health Conditions

#### 3.1 The Formation of the Residential Areas in the Toxic Environment of Pata Rât

Pata Rât’s residential areas near the landfills of Cluj-Napoca have formed over five decades, with the overwhelming majority of them occurring in the last twenty years due to systemic economic causes and institutional racism against Roma (Vincze, 2012, 2013; Desire Foundation, 2016, 2016a, 2016b; Dohotaru et al. 2016; Vincze 2018; Bădiță et al. 2019; Vincze and Zamfir 2019; Zamfir 2022, 2022a). Because of the large disparity between low-income and market housing prices, some city-dwelling workers lack the necessary financial resources to pay for housing other than in Pata Rât. In addition, Cluj’s local government fails to provide them with adequate and affordable social housing in other areas of the city. Moreover, since these authorities do not safeguard impoverished people from eviction or homelessness – and indeed are sometimes directly responsible for the forced eviction of Romani people – they seek refuge in Pata Rât. In their case, material inequality, institutional and everyday racism, and lack of effective legal protection against living in a polluted environment all lead to risks endangering their social and biological lives.

The residential areas in Pata Rât reveal the broad spectrum of responsibility of local authorities for their creation close to the city’s toxic landfills. Regarding its oldest community (Dallas), which dates back to the 1970s and whose residents collect rubbish in the landfills for the benefit all Cluj’s residents, the authorities exercise a policy of indifference disguised as passive tolerance. Concerning an informal housing area established on Cantonului Street in the 2000s (many of its inhabitants work in sanitation companies), the responsibility of Cluj City Hall is indirect but active. It evicted and directed to this territory smaller or larger groups of Roma from other parts of the city, accepting the placement of temporary homes by humanitarian organisations or allowing them to construct makeshift homes of their own. The most direct and active responsibility of the local public administration towards the residents of Pata Rât lies with those who live in so-called modular homes – constructed by the town hall in 2010 for 350 Romani individuals evicted from the city centre to less than a kilometre from what became a non-ecological landfill.

### 3.2 Pollution in Pata Rât and Its Effect on Romani Individuals' Health

Our team installed sensors in the area as part of the ENHOJUST project.<sup>[6]</sup> Hydrogen sulphide (H<sub>2</sub>S), a toxic gas specific to landfills, measured at modular houses in Pata Rât in 2021, exceeded the limits of the national standards set by the Romanian state: a threshold of 0.008 mg/m<sup>3</sup> or 0.006 ppm, in the case of a daily average, and a limit of 0.015 mg/m<sup>3</sup> or 0.011 ppm, in the case of an annual average. In particular periods in 2021, these exceedances reached alarmingly high levels. We have no reason to believe the situation would have been different in other years, as conditions were constant. Therefore, people residing in modular homes have been exposed to this pollution over 13 years. In addition, the H<sub>2</sub>S value measured in Pata Rât's modular houses just 800 metres from the landfills has been significantly higher than, for example, that measured on Soporului Street in Gheorgheni District (a green neighbourhood four kilometres away), indicating a more increased exposure of residents in Pata Rât – or an uneven distribution of exposure to toxic substances across the city.<sup>[7]</sup>

Regarding the annual mean values of the particular matters' measurements at the modular houses, they were as follows: 74 µg/m<sup>3</sup> in the case of PM<sub>2.5</sub> and 225 µg/m<sup>3</sup> in the case of PM<sub>10</sub>. Pollutants fill the area day and night, whether wood smoke or acrid fumes from plastics indoors and out, toxic smoke and soot from waste burning near homes in winter, or constant landfill fires and gaseous emissions from the sites, not to mention the heavy machinery working Pata Rât. The values measured for modular dwellings in 2021 were astronomical and far exceeded the limits established by the World Health Organization and Romanian law. In Pata Rât, the boundaries of the permitted values for 24 hours of suspended particulates PM<sub>2.5</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub> were exceeded as follows: 86 days annually for PM<sub>2.5</sub> and 97 days annually for PM<sub>10</sub>. Those residing in city-hall-constructed modular houses since December 2010 have been exposed to such elevated PM<sub>2.5</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub> values on numerous days per year for over more than a decade.

In addition to our measurements, public statements by the Cluj County Emergency Situations Committee should have alerted the responsible authorities to the health hazards associated with living in a toxic landfill environment but did not. In September 2017, the Committee announced a massive spill in Pata Rât as a result of leachate from landfills – approximately 6,000 cubic metres over an area of three hectares, exceeding by 750 times the permitted level of ammoniacal nitrogen and 12.8 times the value of chlorides, which are extremely hazardous to the environment and human health (Magrădean 2017). In January 2020, the same Committee declared a potential state of emergency, while supporting the County Council president's request to open the new Integrated Waste Management Centre without environmental authorisation. The population in the vicinity of these so-called "temporary landfills" – opened in 2015 – is at risk of disease, including acute respiratory infections, cardio-respiratory events, exacerbation of chronic illnesses, impaired lung function, and poisoning with ammonia, methane, and hydrogen sulphide (Cluj County Emergency Situations Committee 2020).

6 For hydrogen sulphide we used uRADMonitor SMOGGIE-GAS H2S (resolution of 1 ppb, min value 0 ppm, max value 2 ppm): <https://www.uradmonitor.com>.

For suspended particles, we used a sensor produced by Strop de Aer: <https://www.stropde aer.ro>.

7 Data from other sensors installed throughout the city by Strop de Aer: <https://www.stropde aer.ro/monitorizare-in-cluj-napoca>.

The very low number of people over 65 – only 15 – in the three communities surveyed in 2021 indicates that life expectancy in these communities is significantly lower than the national average in Romania, which was 78 years in 2019 (six years lower than the EU average). The vulnerable population in Pata Rât has been exposed to environmental pollution for decades, while their access to health services was suboptimal. Our medical survey, based on people's own statements, reflected that diagnoses of chronic diseases abound, but medication for them is often abandoned, usually due to lack of financial means. People also display frequent symptoms associated with pollution and debilitating respiratory diseases, but many of them remain undiagnosed given the absence of screening programmes for this population. Asthma, heart disease, or cancers are common. Left undiagnosed, these illnesses lead to poor quality of life, reduced work capacity, and premature deaths.

## 4. Discussion: From Legal Rights to Economic Realities and Endangered Health – A Militant Research Perspective

ENHOJUST's militant research began by learning about the experiences of Romani residents from Pata Rât, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, who suffer from environmental pollution, housing deprivation, illnesses, and premature deaths. This happened at a specific moment during a long process of building mutual trust and solidarity between directly affected persons from Pata Rât and activists not from Pata Rât, through which they created a shared space of political activism. In ENHOJUST, we elaborated specific research tools to transform personal narratives into a collective story on the formation of Pata Rât's residential areas and to render visible people's health issues and the severity of air pollution. Identifying the structural causes of the shared problems and the actors responsible for their occurrence helped us politicise manifestations of environmental and housing injustice. This is how our militant research became a tool of political struggle for short-term policy interventions and long-term political economy regime change. Such an investigation can strengthen the collective power of action and increase the chance of the people's demands transforming into an instrument of political pressure.

Through the ENHOJUST research project, we supplemented existing knowledge about the Romani communities constrained to living in Pata Rât with reflections on previously neglected topics. We showed the consequences of inhabiting a toxic environment, where people dispossessed of means to protect themselves from illnesses have a life expectancy much lower than the Romanian or EU average. Those living in inadequate housing and polluted environments are more vulnerable to disease and are also deprived of medical treatment. Environmental factors produce life-threatening conditions, and healthy life expectancy is determined by air, soil, and water quality; however, it also depends on people's material, housing, and labour conditions, products of a larger political economy regime.

All the above assertions on the links between the quality of the environment and health status might appear self-evident; nevertheless, as in the case of Romani individuals constrained to reside in Pata Rât, neither public authorities nor healthcare institutions acknowledged them. If they had done so, Pata Rât

would not have existed, or at least authorities would have been held accountable for the premature deaths and precarious health conditions of the affected population. Nonetheless, Pata Rât exists, and institutional racism inherent in environmental and housing policies – and a political economy regime that prioritises economic interests over people’s lives – are responsible for its formation and its persistence over several decades.

Social categories vulnerable due to their precarious socio-economic situation and to the stigmatisation/ racialisation of their ethnicity or social status end up living in a toxic environment that impacts healthy lives and shortens life expectancy. In these cases, universal human rights – including the right to health, the right to a clean environment, the right to adequate housing, and the right to a healthy life – are all violated; two important indicators, life expectancy in general and healthy life expectancy in particular, are declining; the effects of the unequal distribution of the impact of pollution are felt unevenly, depending on the distance from contaminated areas and toxicity; the interaction of the effects of ill health, inadequate housing, and a toxic environment results in particular forms of social injustice; these injustices and inequalities are racialised insofar as they impact individuals and communities who, based on ethnicity and socio-economic status, are considered an inferior “race” and end up being associated with toxic spaces, which in turn are also stigmatised.

We believe that the environmental injustice in Pata Rât would not have happened if the administrative authorities responsible for waste management had not violated the EU provisions in this area, eluding infringement due to partial measures taken moments before deadlines (such as the relocation near the landfill, its partial closure, or opening of so-called temporary landfills in 2015). The city authorities do not follow the EC recommendations on air pollution measurement in several parts of the city, including Pata Rât, and the measurements taken by the landfill managers are not publicly available. In addition, people living in the area are not informed of these measurements’ results and, if necessary, are not supported by local housing policies to move out of the zone. The local public administration did not comply with the provisions of Romanian and international legislation regarding the minimum distance between a residential area and a toxic site.

At the same time, they did not comply with the standards of the Romanian legislation regarding adequate housing, be it social or emergency housing. Local public authorities should have consulted the affected people when they moved them to a toxic area in 2010 or decided to place two new toxic landfills near inhabitants in 2015. When the authorities admit that there is pollution in Pata Rât, the admission is made only during exceptional circumstances and for reasons other than protecting the people directly affected by this pollution. Since they started living in Pata Rât, Romani residents have neither been screened for health and illnesses that occur in toxic environments nor been informed and consulted about the harmful effects of living in a contaminated area.

For all the reasons described above, the Pata Rât case exemplifies a situation in which environmental standards for landfills have been violated over several decades, together with standards for adequate housing in a healthy environment. Additionally, the case of Pata Rât illustrates a lack of urban planning instruments that require consultation with people affected by major infrastructure developments or safeguarding their housing and healthcare needs. Due to long-term anti-Romani

racism, the people forcibly moved to Pata Rât by Cluj City Hall are associated with rubbish, and many other city inhabitants cannot imagine sharing the same residential areas with Roma. Last but not least, the formation and persistence of the Pata Rât residential area near the landfill would not have happened if people were paid decent wages for their work, allowing them real access to adequate housing on the market, or if local government had provided them public social housing at an affordable rent, given their incomes.

## Conclusion

Our article presented research conducted using a multidisciplinary approach within the ENHOJUST project to sound the alarm about the health risks of living (being housed) in a toxic environment. Because we conceived this endeavour as militant research, our primary goal was to create tools of investigation and thinking that generate new ways of seeing and affecting the world. Via legislative, medical, sociological, and technological perspectives, we constructed and promoted the demands of an anti-racist environmental and housing justice that combats environmental racism and injustice in all three components of the housing-environment-health nexus.

We stressed that due to the situations created at the intersection of environmental and housing injustice, public authorities must develop and implement a series of multi- and inter-sectoral measures. The necessary policies must be supported by appropriate national laws encompassing all the involved domains, that is, environment, housing, health, and spatial planning, and attention should be paid to their links and financing mechanisms to ensure implementation at a local level wherever needed. As a starting point, all the central and local institutions involved in environmental issues should properly register cases of habitation in a toxic environment. This is a crucial step in identifying solutions for existing cases and preventing new ones. Additionally, these problems will not be eradicated whilst there is no political will at the national level to coordinate efforts in this matter.

Our militant research enabled us to identify the principles of anti-racist environmental and housing justice that should be applied in the case presented, within the Romanian legal framework, and, potentially, in other cases at the transnational level. Safeguarding access to adequate housing for all in a clean environment requires several measures; therefore, ENHOJUST defined a 10-point list of political demands and policy recommendations.

1. Ensure adequate social housing for all eligible under the Housing Law, prioritise impoverished people with precarious living conditions, by constructing a sufficient number of public social housing units and implementing a fair allocation system.
2. Prevent forced evictions through integrated housing and social measures, including social and medical assistance and benefits for those in need.
3. Legally ban the relocation of Roma and other poor or homeless people to areas near toxic sites such as landfills, water treatment plants, and industrial sites.
4. Guarantee that each urban regeneration plan has a housing component. Because such projects change the built environment and the social structure of the population in areas undergoing

significant urban change, it should be necessary to protect the vulnerable victims of these transformations and provide them, as appropriate, with suitable housing alternatives.

5. Measure air pollution in residential areas near landfills or other toxic areas and monitor the measurements made by private polluting companies. Communicate the results of these measurements to the people affected and take action, both against the polluters and on behalf of those affected by pollution.
6. Establish and respect the minimum distance between a residential area and a toxic zone that guarantees the health of residents.
7. Inform and consult the public about infrastructure developments that affect their safety and health.
8. Provide those who (continue to) reside in contaminated areas with free periodic screening services and, where necessary, guarantee specialist consultations and appropriate therapies, and offer an alternative residential area in the city as soon as possible.
9. Recognise the uneven geographical development at the level of localities, that is, the existence of infrastructurally underdeveloped areas exposed to pollution, inhabited by racialised minorities such as Roma.
10. Provide the racialised Romani people with affirmative measures that may combat structural inequalities and the long-term effects of anti-Romani racism. Among others, these measures should appropriately sanction and prevent the public authorities from considering a toxic environment as a suitable area for living for impoverished and inferiorised Roma.

Implementing anti-racist environmental and housing justice as a norm in public policies requires not only the legal recognition of rights related to health, housing, and environment but also efforts to change a series of economic, social, and environmental policies to ensure that all people can exercise their right to an adequate home in a healthy environment. Our political understanding of anti-racist environmental and housing justice highlights that, in itself, the legal recognition of the right to a healthy environment does not bring about necessary effective change. This is so because, despite existing legal rights, a profit-driven capitalist society and discriminatory and racist institutional treatment of vulnerable groups continue to expose them to exploitation and dispossession of the means necessary for a decent life.

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