

## Migration as a normal state of things: An interview with a Romanian photographer Petruț Călinescu

In the last 10 years the number of Romanian citizens in Germany has rapidly increased. However, they are often linked to cheap labour in public perception. What is the other side of the coin? A motivation to be mistreated in Germany? [Petruț Călinescu](#) dedicated himself to this and other questions in his reportages and gives up-to-date insights into the areas of conflict which affect Romania and the whole Black Sea region. In his interview for osTraum he answers some questions about his work and the [Center for Documentary Photography](#) co-founded by him.

**osTraum: In view of the current situation: How has the Covid19 crisis impacted you?**

**Petruț:** The impact was brutal and unexpected – I hoped that this was a temporary situation but since March the situation stay the same. Two exhibitions where canceled (one was due in Lombardia, Italy) and also the pending jobs. Since then, I received one assignment only. More than that, the crises restricted my travels for personal project.

**osTraum: I have the feeling that one of the threads that goes through a lot of your work is the depiction of people contrasted with their homes or with architecture more general (e.g. in general, for example “Garage Days” or “Pride and Concrete”). Is that a coincidence or is that intentional?**

**Petruț:** Well, both coincidence and intentional. For the “Pride and Concrete” the initial intention was not to have that architectural angle, but the story lead me that way. The absence of the people who emigrated abroad made me focus on their houses, on the material possession they left in their places. As for other projects, like “Garage Days” the architectural focus is part of the story: How the communist era garages turned today in “escape rooms” from day to day realities.

**To stay or to leave?**

**osTraum: Another common theme that I seem to recognize is migration, from rural to urban but also to other countries. What fascinates you so much about this theme?**

**Petruț:** One quarter of the Romania population left the country. That’s a huge percentage and you can barely find a family without a member or more who emigrated. This is an issue with infinite effects on many layers so is hard to avoid it when you speak about contemporary Romania.

**osTraum: Especially in your “pride and concrete” reportage, I feel a certain melancholy, that you are portraying people who are working hard, giving all they can but are losing their sense of belonging somewhere in this process. What is your impression of this lifestyle? How are people coping when they actually move into the houses they built over such a long time?**

**Petruț:** I was born in a city and lived until now in a block apartment; the nature fascinates me. Romania used to be and partially still is a rural country: Today, half of the population live in the rural areas; many of them doing survival agriculture. There is a connection with the earth and animals we lost it somewhere in our way to progress. Time flows differently in the countryside, actually nobody cares about it. All it matters is if the crops will be good enough or not. But things changed overnight – people had suddenly to possibility to work abroad, the get more money, and their way of life change at a blink of an eye. Many of them still do the farmers things in an inertial way: they return homes from Paris, London or whatever to harvest the plumes or the hay, for example. Obviously, the transportation costs from abroad to the native villages is more costly that the harvest itself, but the simply cannot stand the idea that the harvest will rot if they don't collect it. What the future reserves to them is hard to say – until now, the majority of the huge houses they built with the saved money from abroad they still stay empty.

**osTraum: In Germany, one of the industries the migrant workers are finding jobs is the meat processing industry. Now, several Covid19 outbreaks have again shed the light on the abysmal living and working conditions. The naïve German person might wonder, why so many are nonetheless willing to leave their homes to work in such jobs. From the perspective of a country of origin such as Romania, what is the attitude towards the people going abroad?**

**Petruț:** Probably Western people think that they would employ themselves as butchers and therefore cannot understand why somebody would do that. But in the Eastern Europe the reality is not the same. Corruption, the lack of social and health services, low salaries are making people to go abroad and accept the most difficult jobs. They don't think such: Look, I'd love to go somewhere and slash hogs for 16 hours per day and later rest in a tiny room with all my 20 colleagues. They just go out of desperation and this is why they end up being exploited. The naïve Romanians also wonder here why it is possible in a highly civilized country like Germany to treat emigrants like this.

Overall, Diaspora is the engine of our local economy and the lifesaver of each family. Recently, the mobilized in an exemplary way at presidential elections and save the country from a disaster at least two times. Maybe at the beginning they have been seen as an inferior category since they left for very low standards jobs. But today the one who return home are very skillful and less permissive to the local authorities abuses and corruption. They broke their back to start a new life, they've seen how a functional society works and can use the knowledge back home.

## The chances for a new beginning

**osTraum: The most drastic event in Eastern Europe in the last 50 years, was the collapse of the Soviet Union. How have you personally experienced the transition period from a communist to a more market-driven system?**

**Petruț:** I was 13 when the communist regime collapsed, so I have good memories from that time. There was a huge enthusiasm and a general consent that we will reach the same development level like Western Europe in a few years. When a famous back then analyst said the we need 25 years for that everybody was revolted. Now, 30 year later, we wish it was true. But chaos come also with good things and you have the possibility to build things from scratch. Is hard to think in an objective way about the early transition as it mixes my youth memories also. Although I start working as a photographer at a very young age, at 20, I wish I was more skillful back in those times. There was a fantastic lack of information and resources for documentary/photojournalism were completely lacking. We were looking like at God when we had the chance to drink a beer with a foreign correspondent, trying to sip all the information and look for secret formulas on how to do our jobs. Today, with all the resources with a click distance is hard to understand the context.

**osTraum: You also co-launched the CdFD (Centrul de fotografie documentara or Romanian Center for Documentary Photography) which “produces in-depth visual investigations of local topics in Romania”. What was your motivation behind the foundation and how are you financing the activities?**

**Petruț:** After working for newspapers as a stuff photojournalist I was dreaming to be able to focus on my own projects. Working in media made me feel like a taxi driver: I was waiting for orders and directions. I was lucky enough to catch in the 2000s a good moment for the local media when It was growing and we were able to propose our subjects too. That give me time to breath, while otherwise covered in sports and celebrity assignments. Slowly I was able to free myself and build up a contact network which allowed me to survive professionally since. I was not the only one with the same dream – to craft personal projects with no rush so I teamed up with a bunch of friends, pooling the resources and knowledge in common. We have a small NGO and apply to cultural grants; we do solo or group project, offer documentary photography grants and mentorship and grow an online archive while we focus on new audiences and ways to reach them.

## The Black Sea as a place to be

**osTraum: The Black Sea is for many people an unknown and almost mythical place. You have dedicated a long-term project to it. What was the idea behind this reportage and what do you associate yourself with the Black Sea?**

**Petruț:** I was born at the Black Sea and my first memories and later, the ones as a youth are linked with the sea. During the communist times, the few good merchandise smuggle into the countries were bring by the sailors. They were like heroes walking the unseen paths and bringing back miracles such as video players

and blue jeans. The region I came from, Dobruja, has a high density of different communities coming mainly from around the Black Sea basin: Lipovans, Tatars, Circassians. I was just curious to see all the countries around the sea and how the native places of these minorities look like. Actually I can spend the rest of my life wandering the shores of all the sea and oceans of the worlds, just like this, probably at some point I will find why.

**osTraum: You began your Black Sea reportage in 2000. From what you have witnessed, how has life on its shores changed in the last 20 years?**

**Petruț:** The transition from communism to capitalism bring the joy of consumption which leaves visible traces everywhere. Once empty beaches today are full with umbrellas, sky jets and piles of garbage's. Even the water become an advertising support as often you see ridiculous inflatable things asking you to buy something. Even the sky hasn't escaped undisturbed: light planes flying close by are pulling advertising banners. From a quit place the Black Sea began a very crowded one, colorful and noisy like a bazar.

**osTraum: Besides the ongoing work on the Black Sea project, what are the plans for the future – for you as well as for the Center?**

**Petruț:** I'd like to extend slowly our network and make the transition from a local NGO to a regional one, involving more photographers from the Black Sea area and Eastern Europe. But I won't make any more plans for 2020.