

BETWEEN STIGMATISATION AND EXOTICISATION: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS, LOCAL PERSPECTIVES, AND THE CULTURAL VALORISATION OF ROMA PALACES IN HUEDIN

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ABSTRACT. **Between Stigmatisation and Exoticisation: Media Representations, Local Perspectives, and the Cultural Valorisation of Roma Palaces in Huedin.** Roma palaces are among the most visually distinctive yet publicly contested forms of post-socialist architecture in Romania, but they remain largely absent from formal heritage and tourism frameworks. This study examines the architectural and spatial characteristics of the Roma palaces in Huedin, their representation in the media, and the conditions under which selected buildings could be incorporated into a culturally responsible tourism initiative. A multi-method case-study design combined a georeferenced inventory of 86 palaces, field observation and GIS mapping, qualitative content analysis of 46 media items published between 2010 and 2025, and three semi-structured interviews with a member of a palace-owning household, a municipal representative, and a civic activist. The inventory revealed a concentrated and recurrent architectural profile: 54.7% of the buildings were located on Horea Street (E60), 60.5% had multi-tiered or pavilion-style roofs, 75.6% included turrets or towers, and 55.8% were classified as fully completed. Media attention was strongly event-driven and conflict-oriented. Explicit conflict was identified in 67.4% of the items, while the dominant frames concerned tourism, heritage, and territorial branding, as well as wealth, migration, crime, and social inequality. The interviews provided a more differentiated perspective by highlighting family obligations, migration, seasonal use, hospitality, generational change, and internal social differences. The findings show that public visibility has not produced institutional recognition or shared interpretive authority. Any tourism initiative would require prior consent, community

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participation, negotiated access, agreed rules regarding photography, and the co-production of interpretation with palace owners and other local actors.

Keywords: post-socialist architecture; Roma palaces; contested heritage; media representations; minority-built heritage; Huedin

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationale and research context

Roma palaces - a distinctive post-socialist residential form built predominantly after 1990 - are typically large, multi-tiered, turreted, and ornately decorated, combining architectural references from diverse cultural and geographical contexts. Their emergence has been linked to international migration, intergenerational transfer of family resources, and the central role of the extended family in Roma communities (Gräf, 2008; Preda et al., 2018; Toma, 2020).

Despite their visibility, Roma palaces have received limited attention in academic heritage debates (Oláh et al., 2026). Public and media narratives have emphasised scale, cost, and divergence from architectural norms, often centring on suspicious wealth, welfare dependency, or criminality rather than family organisation, seasonal residence, or the pursuit of community recognition (Preda et al., 2018; Toma, 2020) - part of a wider framing of Roma cultural expression as marginal or exotic, with limited Roma control over its interpretation (Grigore, 2024).

Huedin is a particularly relevant setting: its substantial concentration of palaces along the E60 makes them a prominent feature of the urban landscape, circulated widely through Romanian and international media, yet excluded from formal heritage inventories, tourism strategies, or cultural routes (Oláh et al., 2026) - contributing strongly to the town's external image while remaining outside its officially promoted identity. This tension peaked in 2021, when civic activist Adrian Dohotaru proposed incorporating selected palaces into guided visits (Adevărul, 2021; Monitorul de Cluj, 2021); the proposal drew substantial attention but no organised initiative followed (Clujenii.ro, 2025), exposing divergent positions on heritage value, privacy, legality, and interpretive authority.

Existing studies have examined Roma housing from architectural, ethnographic, historical, and migration-related perspectives (Tomlinson, 2007; Gräf, 2008; Preda et al., 2018; Toma, 2020), while Oláh et al. (2026) note that Roma heritage tourism remains understudied in Central and Eastern Europe. No previous study, to our knowledge, has combined an inventory of the Huedin palaces with analysis of media discourse and stakeholder perspectives - the gap this study addresses.

Beyond its architectural interest, the case is relevant to the focus of this journal on risks and their social dimensions. Stigmatisation, racialization, and

contested urban representations are approached here as social risks and processes that affect both communities and places. They shape how Roma community is perceived and represented, and they also influence how streetscapes and neighbourhoods are valued, visited, and governed. In Huedin, these processes appear in media narratives that link the palaces to illegality and criminality, and the exoticising attention that tourism-oriented initiatives may reproduce. Examining these representations alongside local perspectives therefore allows the study to assess not only the cultural value of the palaces, but also the social risks that accompany their visibility and potential tourism use.

1.2. Aim, objectives, research questions, and article structure

The aim of this study is to examine the architectural, spatial, social, and representational characteristics of the Roma palaces in Huedin and to assess the potential and conditions for incorporating selected buildings into a culturally responsible tourism initiative. The research combines a field inventory, GIS mapping, media content analysis, and semi-structured interviews to relate the buildings' observable characteristics to the meanings attributed to them by residents, local institutions, civic actors, and the media.

The study has three objectives. First, it identifies, maps, and classifies the palaces according to their location, visible architectural characteristics, construction stage, exterior condition, and relationship to public space. Second, it examines how the buildings and their residents were represented in media coverage between 2010 and 2025 and compares these representations with the perspectives of local actors. Third, it evaluates the potential inclusion of selected palaces in cultural tourism and identifies the institutional, social, and ethical requirements for such an initiative. The analysis is therefore guided by three research questions:

RQ1. What spatial and architectural features characterise the Roma palaces of Huedin, and how are these buildings distributed across the town?

RQ2. How have the palaces, their owners, and the wider Roma community been represented in the media, and how do these representations compare with the perspectives expressed by local stakeholders?

RQ3. Under what conditions could selected palaces be incorporated into a culturally responsible tourism initiative without reproducing stigmatisation, exoticisation, or intrusive forms of visitation?

The paper makes three contributions: the first georeferenced inventory of the Huedin palaces; a longitudinal analysis of media representations (2010–2025) distinguishing architectural, legal, socioeconomic, and tourism-related frames; and a comparison of these external representations with the perspectives of a palace-owning household member, a municipal representative, and a civic actor, thereby identifying both the opportunities and the risks associated with the cultural recognition and potential tourism use of the palaces.

The remainder of the article proceeds through the conceptual framework (Section 2), methodology (Section 3), results (Section 4), discussion (Section 5), and conclusions (Section 6).

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Historical context of Roma communities in Transylvania and Romania

The Roma, among the world's largest stateless ethnic groups, are generally traced to central or northwestern India on linguistic grounds, reaching the Balkans via the Byzantine Empire roughly 1,000 years ago and Transylvania by the late 14th century (Achim, 1998, 2004; Kalaydjieva et al., 2001; García-Fernández et al., 2020; Ena et al., 2025). Unlike in Wallachia and Moldavia, where Roma held slave status, in Transylvania they occupied a distinct legal position, subject directly to royal or princely authority under their own leaders (Achim, 1998, 2004). Following Habsburg annexation, Maria Theresa's and Joseph II's sedentarisation policies (1740-1790) banned nomadism and key cultural practices, marking an early, if limited, attempt at forced assimilation (Achim, 1998, 2004; Powell & Lever, 2015).

Starting in the second half of the 19th century, the decline of traditional crafts under the pressure of industrialisation exacerbated occupational marginalisation (Petcuț, 2015). Furthermore, in the Transylvanian context of ethnic diversity and the strong identity of each ethnic group, the Roma were more clearly distinguished from the rest of the population than in Hungary or the Romanian Old Kingdom (Achim, 1998, 2004).

The communist regime did not recognise the Roma as a distinct national minority and pursued their social integration largely through assimilationist policies. Although access to employment, schooling, and housing improved for some households, structural disadvantage, educational inequalities, and occupational marginalisation persisted (Zamfir & Zamfir, 1993; Achim, 1998, 2004).

2.2. Roma palace architecture, social status, and cultural identity

Early post-socialist scholarship framed Roma marginalisation largely through group adaptation to majority society - Zamfir and Zamfir (1993) described a 'symbiotic' relationship contributing to dependence on informal occupations - though this risks underplaying structural exclusion and institutional discrimination. Historical housing data illustrate this marginalisation concretely: the 1893 Hungarian census recorded 26.5% of Transylvania's sedentary Roma population in shacks or huts (1.7% underground, 0.7% in tents), present across most settlements (81.8% in Cluj County) but usually in small numbers (Bolovan,

1993); poor housing remained a visible marker of exclusion thereafter (Powell & Lever, 2015; Crețan & Powell, 2018).

Against this background, the ornate houses that emerged after 1989 marked a visible departure from earlier associations of Roma identity with poverty - evidence that material advancement need not entail cultural assimilation, though the palaces should not be read as a fixed ethnic tradition; rather, they developed under post-socialist conditions of market transition, mobility, and transnational resource transfer (Gräf, 2008; Preda et al., 2018; Toma, 2020). Their varied architectural vocabulary - multi-tiered roofs, turrets, ornamental metalwork - reflects the circulation and selective appropriation of images encountered through migration, and the agency of owners in recombining forms according to their own preferences (Tomlinson, 2007; Gräf, 2008).

Family organisation is particularly relevant to the scale and meaning of these buildings, although not as a uniform explanation: Gräf (2008) relates their dimensions to the extended family's social role, so the house may represent not just an individual household but family continuity and intergenerational achievement, and - for transnational families - a point of return during summer visits and family occasions (Toma, 2020).

2.3. Contested and minority heritage

Heritage is produced not only by a building's age or material qualities but through processes of selection and institutional recognition (Sokka et al., 2021) - processes especially consequential for minority heritage, where recognition is mediated by institutions whose values may diverge from those of the communities concerned (Thouki & Skrede, 2024).

The recognition of Roma heritage in Romania has been shaped by institutional exclusion: during communism, Roma were not formally recognised as a national minority, and sedentarisation and systematisation policies targeted housing and daily life deemed incompatible with dominant norms (Nistor, 2021), leaving Roma histories marginal within Romanian cultural narratives (Grigore, 2024).

The post-socialist palaces occupy an ambiguous position: highly visible yet excluded from official heritage inventories, with meanings that vary widely among owners, authorities, journalists, and observers (Ruegg, 2013). They may thus be approached as contested minority-built heritage - buildings whose cultural significance is disputed and inseparable from questions of ethnicity, status, and institutional authority.

This contested status does not require formal heritage designation; rather, it draws attention to how cultural value is attributed or denied, and by whom. The relevant question is not only whether the buildings hold architectural significance, but whose interpretations are recognised and whether recognition can occur without turning private homes into objects of spectacle.

2.4. Media representations of Roma communities and places

Public understandings of Roma places are shaped not only by physical characteristics but by the textual and visual narratives through which they become known, connecting places with existing stereotypes and cultural expectations (Adorean et al., 2022), especially relevant for the Huedin palaces, which most external audiences encounter through media rather than direct experience.

Media coverage shapes both visibility and interpretation: agenda-setting increases public salience, while framing selects which actors, causes, and evaluations are foregrounded (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), so that headlines, images, and source selection can reproduce particular readings even in ostensibly neutral reporting. These processes operate within longstanding inequalities in Roma representation - Messing and Bernáth (2017) distinguish visibility from voice, noting that frequent coverage rarely gives Roma actors influence over media agendas, which have commonly framed them as either victims or as threats linked to criminality and disorder (Richardson, 2014; Kroon et al., 2016; Chiruta, 2021), with crime frames generating strong digital engagement (Famulari & Wilson, 2026).

Negative representations coexist with romanticised or exoticised depictions of Roma culture (McGarry, 2014; Chiruta, 2021), a tension that in Huedin links architectural visibility to wealth, illegality, criminality, heritage, and tourism (Council of Europe, 2024, 2025), while raising the question of whose voices define the palaces' significance.

These representational patterns can also be examined through the concept of racialisation. Here, racialisation is not treated as a claim about the intentions of individual journalists or public actors, but as a process through which ethnic difference becomes associated with particular social, moral, and spatial meanings. Picker (2017) places anti-Roma racialisation within the production and governance of urban space, showing how Roma places may be constructed as exceptional or problematic in relation to dominant urban norms. More recent work on Eastern European urban marginality similarly treats racialisation as embedded in the production of postsocialist urban inequalities rather than as a secondary cultural prejudice (Alexandrescu et al., 2025). This perspective provides a basis for examining how architectural visibility in Huedin becomes repeatedly connected with illegality, criminality, welfare dependency, aesthetic judgement, and social difference.

2.5. Cultural tourism, minority heritage, and participatory place-making

Cultural tourism engages both tangible heritage and intangible cultural expressions - language, rituals, crafts, social practices (Mousavi et al., 2016; Bilgin et al., 2019) - which for Roma communities intersect through material forms tied to family identity and mobility (Seeman, 2014; Preda et al., 2018), so

the palaces are better read as part of a wider cultural landscape than as isolated curiosities. Tourism can increase minority heritage's visibility and create opportunities for intercultural contact, but greater visibility does not guarantee recognition or equitable representation (Lonardi, 2021): when difference is presented as spectacle, tourism may reproduce the exoticisation already present in media discourse, particularly where private residences become objects of curiosity without meaningful control over access. Addressing this risk means shifting attention from destination promotion to who has the authority to represent a place - in minority contexts, requiring the involvement of the communities concerned in decisions about interpretation and visitor access.

Digital media may establish a destination image ahead of any formal tourism strategy, reinforcing the gap between externally generated visibility and locally negotiated interpretation (Huete-Alcocer & Valero-Tévar, 2021; Abdul Latip et al., 2024). Comparable European initiatives - the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, the Virtual Museum of Roma Culture, the European Association for the Preservation and Promotion of Jewish Culture and Heritage, and ATRIUM's multiperspective approach to dissonant heritage - offer no directly transferable model but underline the importance of contextual interpretation, institutional cooperation, and negotiated visitor access (Selling, 2018; Leech, 2019; Brianso, 2021; Dragomir et al., 2022; Tremlett, 2023).

2.6. Policy and legal framework

Romanian legislation provides no automatic heritage protection for the Huedin palaces: under *Law no. 422/2001*, monument status requires formal classification, so architectural or cultural distinctiveness alone does not confer legal protection.

Heritage status must be distinguished from planning compliance: *Law no. 50/1991* regulates construction authorisation and *Law no. 350/2001* governs spatial planning, so a building may lack heritage status while remaining subject to planning rules, and an authorised building may later depart from its approved design. Broader policy frameworks - the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*, *Romania's Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens Belonging to the Roma Minority 2022–2027* and *Faro Convention* (which sets broad, discretionary objectives rather than specific measures) (Colomer, 2021), and the *National Tourism Development Strategy 2025-2035* - support documentation and community-based initiatives, but none confers formal heritage status on the Huedin palaces.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a multi-method case-study design combining a georeferenced field inventory, semi-structured interviews, qualitative media content analysis, and secondary documentary analysis. GIS was used to map and

describe the spatial distribution of the identified Roma palaces. The different sources were examined together to relate observable architectural characteristics to media narratives and local stakeholder perspectives.

To enhance consistency, all stages involving interpretive judgement were reviewed by at least two members of the research team. The field inventory and architectural classifications were cross-checked against the photographs and database records; media search results, inclusion decisions, and analytical coding were also reviewed by a second researcher; and Romanian-to-English translations of interview and media material were checked against the original texts. Any differences in interpretation were discussed and resolved through consensus.

3.1. Study area

Huedin is a small town in Cluj County, Romania, located approximately 50 km west of Cluj-Napoca along the E60 European route and within the ethnographic region of Țara Călatei. Of its 8,069 inhabitants recorded in the 2021 census, 880 identified as Roma, which represents 12.3% of those who declared ethnicity (National Institute of Statistics, 2021).

Huedin covers approximately 9.3 km², over half residential. Retail, transport, and manufacturing anchor the local economy, though manufacturing employment declined substantially between 2008 and 2018, and tourism infrastructure has contracted sharply - accommodation capacity was 50.4% lower in 2019 than in 2008, largely due to the disappearance of tourist guesthouses (Huedin Town Council, 2021).

Transport accessibility also shapes the town's tourism potential. Huedin has direct rail connections to Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, and several major Romanian cities, whereas regional bus services to surrounding rural and mountain destinations are less frequent, particularly at weekends (CFR Călători, 2026; Autogari.ro, 2026; Cluj County Council, 2026; Sălaj County Council, 2026). The town is therefore relatively accessible by rail, although car-free onward travel to surrounding attractions remains more limited.

Huedin was selected because it contains a substantial concentration of Roma palaces along the E60, making them a prominent roadside feature whose visibility has been extended by media and online images well beyond the local context, despite the absence of any official inventory or organised visitor initiative. It is therefore treated as an analytically relevant case, not as representative of all Roma communities or palace-building traditions.

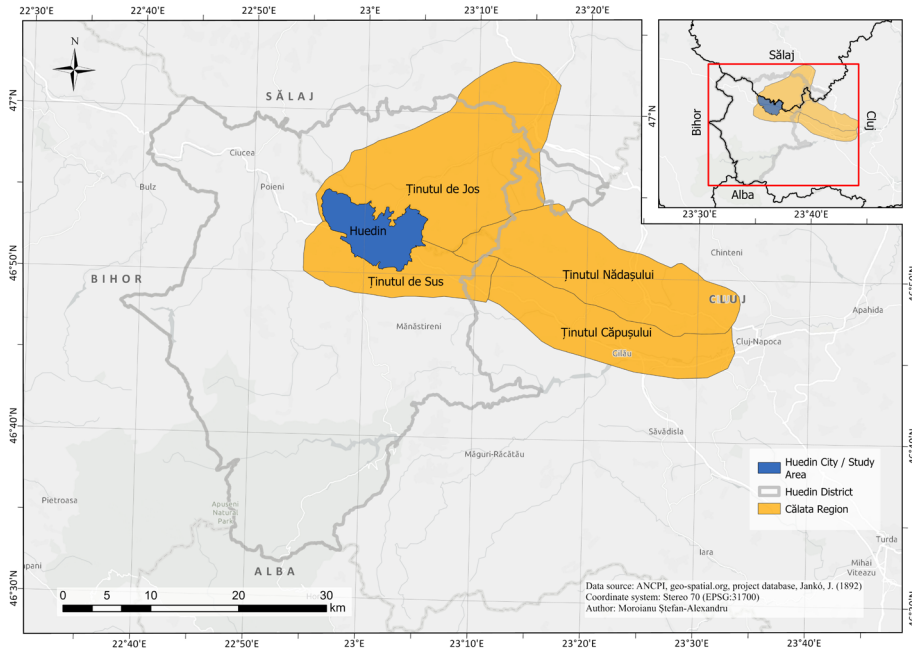


Fig. 1. Location of Huedin within the Călata ethnographic region and Cluj County

3.2. Research design and data sources

The study drew on four data categories: a georeferenced fieldwork inventory of 86 palaces with exterior photographs and standardised records, three semi-structured interviews (a palace-owning household, the municipality, a civic actor), a corpus of 46 media items (2010–2025, 42 with accessible full text) **Appendix A**, and census, planning, heritage, and policy documents providing demographic, historical, and institutional context.



Fig. 2. Research design and analytical workflow adopted in the study

3.3. Data collection

3.3.1. GIS-based inventory and field documentation

The research was conducted between April and July 2026 and comprised three stages: the preparation of a preliminary GIS inventory, field documentation, and post-field verification and database completion. For the purposes of the inventory, a building was classified as a Roma palace when it met at least two of the following criteria: two or more storeys and a footprint substantially larger than neighbouring residential buildings; the presence of a turret or tower element; and visibly ornamental, non-standard roof or façade treatment.

Prior to fieldwork, a preliminary inventory of Roma palaces was compiled as a point feature layer in ArcGIS Pro by manually georeferencing each property using historical imagery available in Google Earth Pro (Historical Imagery) and multi-temporal imagery available in Google Maps. The resulting point layer was uploaded to ArcGIS Online, where a web application developed with ArcGIS Experience Builder was created to support field documentation.

Field documentation and photographic recording were carried out on 20 May 2026 through observation from publicly accessible streets. During the survey, each pre-identified property was photographed and verified against preliminary inventory. Where necessary, additional point features were added, while locations that did not meet the established criteria were removed from the inventory.

Following field verification, the photographic documentation was interpreted and integrated into a standardised inventory database. The post-field interpretation of the photographic record ensured the consistent assessment of architectural characteristics across all inventoried properties. For each confirmed property, the database recorded its location, estimated construction period, number of storeys, roof configuration and colour, turrets, balconies or loggias, columns, façade finish, visible joinery, decorative elements, apparent exterior condition, construction stage, apparent structural system, visibility from public space, and relationship to the street and neighbouring properties. Interior characteristics were excluded because access to the buildings was not available. The only exception was the palace of the local *bulibaşă* (see Section 3.3.2.), whose wife, the household participant, allowed the research team to enter the house; the interiors visited there are illustrated in Fig. 3 but were not included in the standardised inventory.

The records and photographs were subsequently integrated into a GIS database. The estimated construction period was assigned according to the earliest available image in which the principal building volume could be identified. Where the available imagery did not permit a reliable estimate, the construction period was recorded as undetermined.



Fig. 3. Beyond the façade: interior spaces and decorative features of a Roma palace in Huedin

Photo: Radu-Mihai Tamasi

To support access to this inventory beyond the aggregated results presented in this article, the georeferenced database of the 86 surveyed palaces - including location, estimated construction period, and the architectural attributes recorded during fieldwork - was made available as a public, read-only online resource: <https://cgeoreg.maps.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?webmap=510a550d21814a6187104925db429f27>. External users can consult and query the records but cannot edit or add points to the dataset.

3.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Three participants were selected purposively because they occupied different positions in relation to the palaces: a member of a palace-owning household and wife of the local *bulibaşă* (a traditional Roma community leader), the Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, and civic activist and former Member of Parliament Adrian Dohotaru. The first two interviews were conducted on 20 May 2026 and the third on 10 June 2026.

The interview guide was developed from the research questions, preliminary media review, and observations made during fieldwork. Common topics included the history and social meanings of the palaces, relations between owners and local institutions, and their possible cultural and tourism use. Questions were also adapted to each participant's position. The household interview addressed construction history, family use, generational change, hospitality, and informal authority; the municipal interview focused on planning

regulation, taxation, integration, political representation, and the public image of Huedin; and the interview with Dohotaru examined his 2021 proposal and the conditions under which a future initiative might be developed.

The interviews were conducted in Romanian, audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed, and translated into English. Participants also consented to being identified in the article by name or by their institutional or community role, as applicable. The full interview guide is provided in **Appendix B**.

3.3.3. Media corpus

Media items were identified through Google using the Romanian- and English-language search strings “*palatele țigănești Huedin*”, “*palate romi Huedin*”, and “*Roma palace Huedin*”. The search was updated in June 2026. No relevant digital publication issued before 2010 was identified; 2010 therefore represents the earliest publication retrieved, while the latest item included in the corpus was published in 2025.

Materials were included when they focused directly on the Huedin palaces, discussed them as part of a broader Romanian or regional phenomenon, or provided contextual information directly relevant to Roma housing and identity. Distinct publications reporting on the same event were retained because repetition and media amplification formed part of the phenomenon under examination. The final corpus comprised 46 items, including digital news reports, blogs and travel platforms, photographic material, and audiovisual sources. Full textual content was available for 42 items.

3.4. Data analysis

3.4.1. Spatial, architectural, and interview analysis

Inventory variables were analysed using frequencies and percentages, with GIS mapping used to examine the buildings' distribution, street-level concentration, and relationship to the E60 corridor; classifications relied solely on observable exterior characteristics, not on structural, ownership, or legal assessment. Interview transcripts were analysed through combined deductive and inductive thematic coding, with initial categories drawn from the research questions and additional themes developed through repeated reading. The three interviews were compared across household, municipal, and civic perspectives, with quotations selected to preserve their differing institutional positions.

3.4.2. Media content and lexical analysis

The individual media item was the unit of analysis: for each of the 46 items, publication date, source, geographical origin, format, relevance, and full-text availability were recorded, and items were coded for evaluative tone

(positive/neutral/negative, based on treatment of the palaces, owners, or tourism proposals), presence of conflict (legal, administrative, social, cultural, or discursive disagreement, coded separately from tone), and a dominant (plus, where relevant, secondary) theme, the dominant theme feeding the numerical distributions and lexical grouping.

For the lexical analysis, the 42 full-text items were grouped by dominant theme and translated into English before preprocessing: stopwords, punctuation, numerals, transcription artefacts, and singleton terms were removed, spelling and grammatical variants normalised, and general corpus identifiers (Huedin, palace/palaces, Roma, Gypsy) excluded so they would not dominate the visualisations, generated in WordClouds.com with size proportional to frequency; ethnic terminology in the original texts was nonetheless retained for the qualitative content analysis.

3.4.3. Assessment of tourism potential

The tourism-potential assessment synthesised evidence from the inventory, interviews, media analysis, policy documents, and comparable European initiatives. The SWOT matrix distinguished internal attributes (spatial concentration, visual distinctiveness, privacy constraints, building condition) from external opportunities or threats (visitor interest, institutional support, stigmatising representations, intrusive-tourism risk), with proposed interpretation forms assessed against owner consent, community participation, negotiated access, and protection of private space.

3.5. Study limitations and directions for future research

The single-case design and small number of interviews limit generalisability; the three participants offer contrasting, not representative, perspectives, and the architectural inventory relied on exterior observation only, without access to interiors, planning files, or structural assessments.

The media corpus may not capture all relevant coverage, since search results and digital archives are dynamic and older publications may no longer be discoverable; the 2010 lower boundary reflects the earliest item identified, not a predetermined period, and may partly reflect limited online material before that date. Translation into English may have affected lexical frequencies, and repeated reporting of the same events may have inflated the prominence of certain terms.

Future research should include additional palace owners, younger residents, women, residents from economically disadvantaged Roma households, tourism operators, and other local residents; examine individual planning records; compare Huedin with other towns; and test a small, community-approved pilot visit.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Palace inventory: spatial distribution and architectural characteristics

The field inventory identified 86 buildings that met the classification criteria presented in Section 3.3.1. Although the buildings shared features such as multi-tiered roofs, turrets, metallic ornamentation, balconies, columns, and vivid colours, they varied considerably in scale, façade treatment, roof configuration, and decorative density.

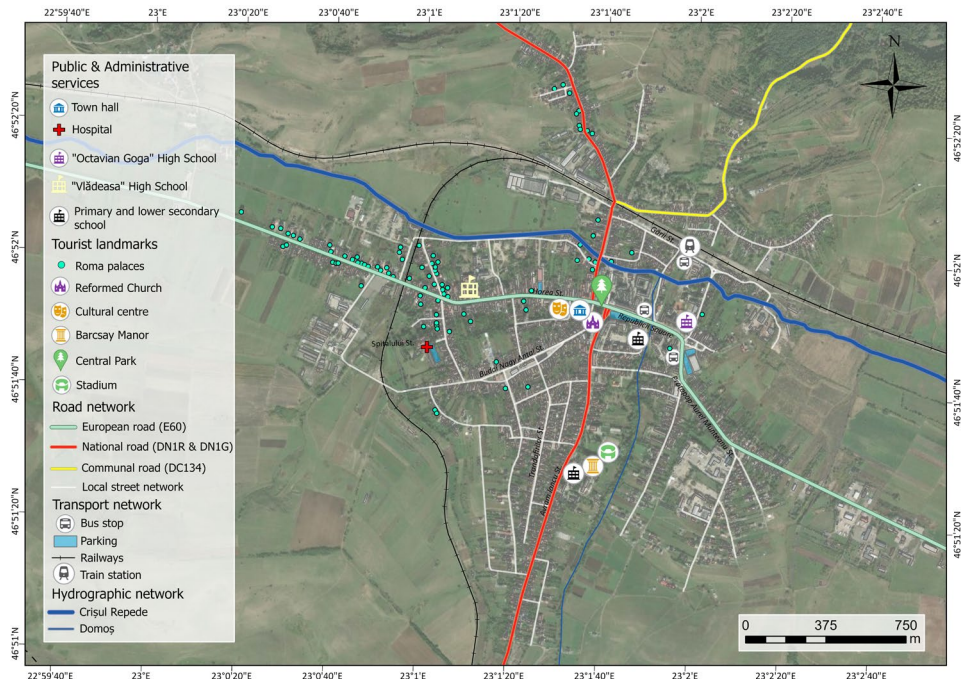


Fig. 4. Spatial distribution of the inventoried Roma palaces and selected urban landmarks and infrastructure in Huedin

Earlier media reports estimated the number of palaces in Huedin at between 96 and 100. As they did not provide classification criteria or an inventory method, these figures are not directly comparable with the 86 buildings identified in this study. Some of the difference may also be related to changes in the buildings over time.

Most palaces had two or three storeys. Turrets or towers were identified in 75.6% of the buildings, multi-tiered or pavilion-style roofs in 60.5%, balconies

or loggias in 80.2%, and columns in 66.3%. Reinforced concrete with brick masonry was the predominant apparent structural system, accounting for 77.9% of the inventory. The largest estimated construction-period category comprised buildings constructed before 2009 (41.9%). Spatially, the palaces were strongly concentrated on Horea Street (E60), which contained 47 of the 86 surveyed buildings (54.7%). Florilor Street contained a further 14 palaces (16.3%), while the remaining buildings were more dispersed across the town. Although 55.8% were classified as apparently completed, 27.9% were at an advanced stage and 12.8% were assigned to other or unclear stages. Explicitly unfinished façade surfaces accounted for 25.6% of the inventory, while 19.8% combined several types of finish.

Table 1. Spatial, architectural, construction, and exterior-condition characteristics of the surveyed palaces (N = 86)

Dimension	Category	n	%
Street location	Horea St	47	54.7
	Florilor St	14	16.3
	Spitalului St	5	5.8
	Vlădeasa St	4	4.7
	Other streets (10 in total)	16	18.6
Construction stage	Fully completed	48	55.8
	Advanced, nearing completion	24	27.9
	Other or unclear stage	11	12.8
	Unspecified/no data	3	3.5
Estimated construction period	Before 2009	36	41.9
	2009–2013	17	19.8
	2014–2018	15	17.4
	2019–2024	16	18.6
	Unspecified/no data	2	2.3
Number of storeys	1 storey	5	5.8
	2 storeys	44	51.2
	3 storeys	33	38.4
	4 storeys	2	2.3
	Unspecified/no data	2	2.3
Turrets or towers	Present	65	75.6
	Absent	18	20.9

Roof colour	Unspecified/no data	3	3.5
	Red, maroon or burgundy	27	31.4
	Anthracite grey, black or silver	27	31.4
	Cobalt blue	17	19.8
	Orange or terracotta	2	2.3
	Mixed colours	8	9.3
	Other colour	1	1.2
	Unspecified/no data	4	4.7
Roof form	Multi-tiered or pavilion-style	52	60.5
	Simple hipped roof	15	17.4
	Simple gabled roof	14	16.3
	Dome-based roof	1	1.2
	Unspecified/no data	4	4.7
Balcony or loggia	Present	69	80.2
	Absent	14	16.3
	Unspecified/no data	3	3.5
Columns	Present	57	66.3
	Absent	26	30.2
	Unspecified/no data	3	3.5
Façade finish	Painted and finished render	44	51.2
	Mixed or combined finishes	17	19.8
	Unpainted or unfinished render	16	18.6
	Exposed AAC blockwork	4	4.7
	Exposed brickwork	2	2.3
	Unspecified/no data	3	3.5
White PVC window or door frames	Present and explicitly identified	57	66.3
	Not identified	26	30.2
	Unspecified/no data	3	3.5
Semicircular-arched windows	Present	53	61.6
	Not identified	30	34.9
	Unspecified/no data	3	3.5
Apparent exterior condition	Good or very good	51	59.3
	Moderate	31	36.0
	Poor or degraded	2	2.3

Apparent structural system	Unspecified/no data	2	2.3
	Reinforced concrete with brick masonry	67	77.9
	Reinforced concrete with AAC or mixed masonry	11	12.8
	Reinforced concrete with stone or mixed masonry	2	2.3
	Reinforced concrete only	1	1.2
	Reinforced concrete with unspecified masonry	1	1.2
	Other or mixed structural system	1	1.2
	Unspecified/no data	3	3.5

4.2. Media representations of the palaces

The media corpus comprised 46 items published between 2010 and 2025, of which 42 had accessible full text. 41 focused directly on the palaces of Huedin, four addressed them within a broader national or regional discussion, and one provided contextual material on Roma housing and identity (Table 2).

Evaluative coding produced a near-even distribution between neutral and negative items: 19 were coded as neutral, 18 as negative, and nine as positive. However, neutrality of tone did not necessarily indicate the absence of controversy. Explicit social, administrative, or discursive conflict was identified in 31 items, including several neutral reports that reproduced accusations, institutional disagreements, or stigmatising statements without explicitly endorsing them.

Table 2. Composition and analytical coding of the media corpus (N = 46)

Dimension	Category	n	%
Corpus coverage	Full text available	42	91.3
	Visual material without article text	2	4.3
	Paywalled excerpt only	1	2.2
	Video without full transcript	1	2.2
Media origin	Local or regional	19	41.3
	National	20	43.5
	International	7	15.2
Media format	Online news and digital press	37	80.4
	Blogs and travel platforms	6	13.0
	Photography or visual archives	2	4.3
	Television or online video	1	2.2
Relevance to Huedin	Direct	41	89.1
	Partial	4	8.7

	Contextual	1	2.2
Evaluative tone	Positive	9	19.6
	Neutral	19	41.3
	Negative	18	39.1
Conflict	Present	31	67.4
	Absent	15	32.6
Dominant theme	Architecture, aesthetics and urban image	7	15.2
	Legality, governance and urban conflict	10	21.7
	Wealth, migration, crime and social inequality	14	30.4
	Tourism, heritage and territorial branding	15	32.6

Four dominant thematic categories were identified. Tourism, heritage, and territorial branding accounted for 15 items (32.6%), followed by wealth, migration, crime, and social inequality with 14 items (30.4%). Legality, governance, and urban conflict comprised ten items (21.7%), while architecture, aesthetics, and urban image included seven (15.2%). These categories represent the principal focus of each item rather than mutually exclusive subjects, as individual media sources frequently combined aesthetic judgements, allegations concerning wealth, planning disputes, and proposals for tourism development.

Media attention was event-driven rather than continuous. Coverage intensified between 2011 and 2013 around construction legality, migration, and criminal investigations, and again in June 2021 following Adrian Dohotaru's proposal to incorporate the palaces into guided visits and territorial branding. The latter episode generated 17 items, indicating a concentration of coverage around a single media event rather than a sustained increase in independent reporting. The lexical analysis illustrates the vocabulary associated with each thematic category (Fig. 5). General corpus identifiers - Huedin, palace/palaces, Roma, and Gypsy - were excluded to prevent them from dominating the visualisations and to make differences between the thematic categories more visible.

4.2.1 Architecture, aesthetics, and urban image

The seven items in this category focused on the buildings' scale, colours, façades, roofs, turrets, columns, and decorative elements. The earliest source, a photographic portfolio published in 2010, documented the façades without accompanying interpretation. Later coverage increasingly combined visual description with judgements concerning taste, luxury, and social status.

A 2013 national overview initially described Roma houses as "*a genuine spectacle of shapes, colours and opulence*". When discussing Huedin specifically, however, its language became more critical:

Evaluative language was also evident in media titles. The Financial Times referred to *“The gaudy, joyful palaces of the Roma”* (Financial Times, 2020), while a Romanian television programme presented the interiors through luxury and spectacular comparison: *“Luxury and Wealth in the Roma Palaces! It’s Like the Louvre Here!”* (Kanal D Romania, 2021).

The lexical profile combined architectural and construction vocabulary with references to wealth and transnational influence (Fig. 4a). The most frequent substantive terms included houses (18), built (16), gates (7), turrets (6), villas (6), and abroad (8). Wealth-related terms occurred 12 times, while turrets, turreted, and towers appeared nine times. Explicit labels such as “bad taste” and “kitsch” occurred less frequently but appeared in prominent evaluative passages.

4.2.2 Legality, governance, and urban conflict

The ten items in this category addressed building permits, departures from approved designs, court proceedings, planning regulation, and the response of public authorities. Questions of legality also resurfaced in later debates over whether the palaces should be recognised as tourist attractions.

An important distinction appeared in the 2011 coverage. Although some headlines suggested that the palaces were generally unauthorised, Huedin’s mayor at the time described a more specific problem involving alterations to approved designs, particularly roofs and turrets:

“We do not currently have the money for a new General Urban Plan, but it would establish new parameters for issuing building permits, and these Gypsy palaces with towers would disappear. Since I became mayor in 2008, I have issued only three building permits for such palaces, and illegal turrets appeared in only one case. I took the owner to court and won, and the roof is to be demolished” (Știri de Cluj, 2011).

In the same article, however, the mayor acknowledged that the principal structures were not necessarily illegal:

“It must be understood that these mammoth buildings comply with all the permits in force. How could we demolish the palaces if they were designed by some of the best Romanian architects? The problem is that they want distinctive roofs and fail to comply with the final part of the approved design. They build towers because it is believed that the number of towers corresponds to the number of kilograms of gold they own” (Știri de Cluj, 2011).

These statements distinguish between an entirely unauthorised building and alterations that depart from an approved design. This distinction was often blurred in subsequent coverage. Evenimentul Zilei generalised unauthorised construction to the wider phenomenon of Roma palaces, while Actual de Cluj stated in 2019 that many of Huedin’s palaces had been built without planning permission (Evenimentul Zilei, 2011; Actual de Cluj, 2019). Such formulations represented the palace landscape as broadly irregular without examining the legal status of individual properties.

National coverage also portrayed local authorities as having simultaneously authorised, tolerated, and attempted to control the development of palace districts:

“Local public authorities conceal neighbourhoods of palaces from view, although from 1991-1992 onwards they encouraged their development by issuing building permits and planning certificates on a large scale and tolerating construction without any authorisation within their jurisdictions” (Evenimentul Zilei, 2011).

The same article described some architectural elements as “alien to Romanians”, shifting the discussion from planning compliance towards cultural and national belonging. Confrontational terminology was also used by public officials:

“I have 99 pagodas in Huedin, and three have been built during my term. If they do not comply with the design, I fine them and then take them to court. Nobody will build however they please any longer” (Evenimentul Zilei, 2011).

Expressions such as “pagodas”, “turrets”, and “towers” framed planning disputes through ethnicised and evaluative descriptions of the built environment. Legality resurfaced during the 2021 tourism debate, when online comments reproduced by Gazeta de Transilvania described the palaces collectively as unauthorised and linked them to tax evasion, illegal income, and welfare dependency. These allegations were used to oppose their possible recognition as cultural or tourism resources (Gazeta de Transilvania, 2021). Across the category, public authorities were represented ambiguously, both as enforcers of planning regulations and as actors accused of having authorised, tolerated, or failed to control the palace landscape.

The lexical profile reflected this emphasis on planning and enforcement (Fig. 4b). Among the most frequent terms were mayor (20), built (12), roof (8), permits (6), illegal (6), and court (6). Legality therefore functioned both as a technical planning issue and as a broader frame through which the legitimacy of the palaces within Huedin was contested.

4.2.3 Wealth, migration, crime, and social inequality

14 items were assigned to this category. Ten were coded as negative, and conflict was identified in ten. Coverage was concentrated between 2011 and 2013, when Romanian media reproduced British reporting and police investigations involving named members of families originating from Huedin. Although these cases concerned specific individuals, headlines and commentary frequently extended associations with criminality to the wider Roma community and the palace landscape.

The dominant narrative connected migration, begging, welfare payments, theft, and visible investment in housing. One local article contrasted palace owners with poorer Roma households:

“Extremes meet in Huedin. In one part of the town, the Gypsies who built palaces with money begged abroad rule the area, while on the hill around 200 Roma live in abject poverty” (Huedinul, 2011).

Internal inequality was presented primarily as a contrast between conspicuous wealth and severe deprivation. A non-Roma resident described the palaces as superficial displays:

“They bring money into the country, hire workers to build palaces for them, and then leave again. What is the use of the palaces? They still sleep in their shacks anyway. The palaces are beautiful only on the outside” (Huedinul, 2011).

The same article briefly included the perspective of a Roma resident living in poverty:

“I have never been abroad. We have a small horse, and I go with the poor animal to do day labour. We have three children. We manage as best we can on around 300 RON coming into the household each month” (Huedinul, 2011).

These statements indicate socioeconomic differences within Huedin’s Roma population. Across the corpus, however, direct Roma testimony was less prominent than statements by public officials, police representatives, neighbours, and journalists.

Several articles treated money brought from the United Kingdom as the principal explanation for palace construction, even when its precise source remained uncertain. A local police official stated:

“We cannot know what they do in England. What is certain is that they built the palaces with money brought from England” (Adevărul, 2012).

Other media sources more directly associated palace construction with theft and organised crime. By contrast, a statement attributed to one Roma family presented labour and transnational mobility as explanations for its wealth:

“We are a very, very wealthy family. We work in England, Spain and France. We make a great deal of money” (Știri de Cluj, 2012; Știrile ProTV, 2012).

This explanation was positioned alongside police investigations and accusations from local residents, including the following statement:

“They have never worked in Romania. They only steal, steal, and steal. They began by selling stolen whisky and cigarettes in the 1990s, before moving to Great Britain” (Gazeta de Cluj, 2012).

The collective pronoun “they” extended accusations concerning particular individuals to a wider group, allowing specific criminal cases to become a general explanation for the emergence of the palace landscape.

In 2023, the association between architecture and wealth circulated through social media in a different form. A Spanish vlogger claimed that each roof level represented one million euros and that a house with six levels therefore indicated a fortune of six million euros. Although the article described the theory as unverified, it transformed an architectural feature into a supposed numerical indicator of family wealth (Adevărul, 2023).

The lexical profile was dominated by terms relating to family, money, Britain, and criminality (Fig. 4c). The most frequent included family (35), money

(34), British (32), Rostaş (26), built (25), England (19), and police (18). References to theft, arrests, welfare, benefits, and begging further connected migration with criminality and social assistance, while terms relating to wealth and luxury reinforced the association between the palaces and conspicuous affluence. Overall, migration was represented less as a diverse set of labour and family trajectories than as the route through which suspicious or criminalised wealth was believed to reach Huedin.

4.2.4 Tourism, heritage, and territorial branding

The fourth category comprised 15 items, 13 of which contained explicit conflict. Most formed part of the media cluster generated in June 2021 by Adrian Dohotaru's proposal to include selected palaces in guided visits and reconsider their place within the cultural image of Cluj and Transylvania.

Dohotaru's questions were reproduced almost *verbatim* across numerous media sources:

"What if the Gypsy palaces of Huedin became a brand for Cluj? What if we managed to incorporate the country's Roma heritage by organising guided tours of such palaces, naturally with the agreement of the hosts in Huedin or Turda?" (Info Huedin, 2021; Foaia Transilvană, 2021; Monitorul de Cluj, 2021a; Adevărul, 2021; Libertatea, 2021; Gazeta de Transilvania, 2021).

Drawing on a survey cited in his post, he also presented tourism as a possible form of direct contact between Roma residents and members of the majority population:

"What if the 80% of Romanians who, according to a survey conducted by the IRES [Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy], do not want Roma in their town, family or neighbourhood visited such palaces and met the residents? Would their preconceptions change, or would they become stronger?" (Info Huedin, 2021; Foaia Transilvană, 2021; Monitorul de Cluj, 2021a; Adevărul, 2021; Libertatea, 2021; Gazeta de Transilvania, 2021).

The proposal therefore extended beyond sightseeing to cultural encounter, while acknowledging that contact might reinforce rather than reduce prejudice. Dohotaru also suggested temporary exhibitions addressing Roma marginalisation at Pata Rât, interpretations based on the concepts of kitsch and camp, and a cultural event combining Roma, electronic, and classical music:

"Could Romania not create an original Eastern-Western mix of Roma music, electronic music and - oh my God - 'coolture', high culture, at some Electric Palace, rather than at Electric Castle or Untold, where we try so hard to be Western pop?" (Info Huedin, 2021; Foaia Transilvană, 2021; Monitorul de Cluj, 2021a; Adevărul, 2021; Libertatea, 2021; Gazeta de Transilvania, 2021).

The idea of an "Electric Palace" connected the buildings to cultural production and proposed an alternative to Cluj's established festival brands.

Media responses ranged from interest to outright rejection. One online commenter quoted by Foaia Transilvană argued that buildings allegedly financed through the exploitation of Roma children should not become tourist attractions,

showing how previous narratives of criminality shaped responses to their possible cultural recognition (Foaia Transilvană, 2021). The mayor of Huedin rejected the proposal:

“Let him give us ideas for brands for Cluj County. I find it inappropriate; I think it is a joke” (Monitorul de Cluj, 2021b).

By contrast, one owner expressed willingness to receive visitors:

“Free of charge. Any time, any time” (Observer News, 2021).

This position cannot be generalised to other households, but it indicates that at least one resident was open to receiving visitors.

Nevertheless, international travel writing illustrated the risk of transforming curiosity into intrusive or exoticising observation. One blogger acknowledged this tension:

“So what’s the point of this post, to act as an exhibition on ironic poverty porn? A little, I guess. Or is it simply more ragging on gypsies? Maybe, if you see it that way” (All Things Romania, 2016).

Despite this acknowledgement, the post continued to present the buildings and their residents through ridicule and social comparison.

The lexical profile was dominated by vocabulary associated with the 2021 proposal (Fig. 4d). Brand and tours each occurred 23 times, followed by guided and kitsch with 19 occurrences, tourists with 17, and heritage and visiting with 16 each. References to hosts (20), owners (17), and agreement (11) indicate that access and consent were also recurrent elements of the debate. Because many items reproduced the same post, quotations, and reactions, these frequencies primarily reflect media amplification around a single proposal.

4.3. Community and local stakeholder perspectives

The interviews complement the media analysis by shifting attention from external representations to local interpretations of the palaces. They introduced themes that were less visible in press coverage, including family obligation, seasonal use, hospitality, generational change, institutional distance, and control over representation. The three participants did not provide a unified or representative perspective; rather, their statements reflected the different positions of a member of a palace-owning household, a municipal representative, and the civic actor who proposed their cultural and tourism use.

4.3.1. Reframing wealth, architecture, and generational change

The household participant provided a different perspective from media narratives that associated the palaces primarily with begging, welfare payments, and criminal income. She described the resources invested in the house in terms of inheritance, labour, and intergenerational responsibility:

“This wealth was passed down from our ancestors; our parents gave it to us [...]. That’s how it is with us; wealth is passed on to the boys if they work. The parent works for the children” (Household participant, May 2026).

She also referred to the family's earlier experience of poverty and attributed its subsequent prosperity to parental support and work abroad:

"We were poor too. We were lucky that our parents helped us [...]. We worked as well. We went to different countries, and we worked there among those people" (Household participant, May 2026).

These statements do not establish the complete financial history of the house, but they show that the participant associated it with inheritance, migration, and work. She also presented wealth as carrying obligations towards relatives and other community members:

"If someone falls into trouble, we all come together and help each other" (Household participant, May 2026).

She referred to providing poorer families with money, clothing, and food. Family involvement was also evident in her description of the design process:

"[...] we came up with this idea, let's build this house. We gave him the whole sketch, all of it, here you make a room, here you make a bathroom, here you do this, and he did everything exactly like that" (Household participant, May 2026).

Although a designer prepared the technical plan, the family decided the internal organisation and decoration of the house. This indicates a degree of domestic and aesthetic agency that was largely absent from media representations centred on extravagance, imitation, and bad taste. The participant also described the palace as a place for extended-family gatherings:

"Everyone comes here to us. They come, we enjoy ourselves, and we spend time here with the children" (Household participant, May 2026).

The municipal representative similarly stated that family members return to Huedin mainly during the summer and for weddings, funerals, and other family occasions. As many spend most of the year abroad, some houses are used seasonally, with activity concentrated in their large ground-floor rooms. Limited use of the upper floors should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence that the buildings have no domestic or social function. The household participant, however, critically reassessed the original decision to build on such a scale, particularly because of the maintenance costs:

"It makes no sense, no sense at all. It was about showing off. Better to have a small, modest house, just right, with everything you need and without so many expenses" (Household participant, May 2026).

She estimated that the same investment could have produced two smaller houses, while also acknowledging that her family's palace had served as a model for other households:

"[...] everyone came looking for a model. We were the first to do this style, with the scale and everything. And everyone marvelled at it" (Household participant, May 2026).

Her reference to Indian films as a source of inspiration further indicates that the architecture drew on images circulating beyond the local community. In her description, the palace appears as a family achievement, an expression of

personal aesthetic preference and social distinction, and, in retrospect, a costly form of competitive display. The other two participants also referred to a broader generational shift away from palace construction. The municipal representative explained:

“They no longer build palaces, they buy ready-made houses, at most they change the windows, put in double-glazed windows, so at this point you can no longer tell on a street whether someone is Romanian, Hungarian, or Roma” (Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, May 2026).

Dohotaru reported a similar position after visiting a palace. According to him, the owner’s son was continuing the project because of his parents’ wishes, but would otherwise have built *“something completely different, something much more functional”* (Dohotaru, June 2026).

The interviews linked the palaces to family continuity, migration, hospitality, and social display, but also to concerns about cost and functionality. Participants described a shift towards smaller or ready-made houses, suggesting that palace construction was associated with a particular post-1990 period rather than with an enduring architectural preference.

4.3.2. Legality, integration, and informal authority

The interviews provided a more differentiated view of legality than much of the media coverage. Whereas several articles referred broadly to illegal palaces, the municipal representative distinguished between the regulatory framework under which the buildings were initially approved and the rules applied to later construction:

“In terms of authorisation, the palaces were authorised at the time. You have to keep in mind that back then the legislative framework was what it was. Then gradually Law 50 appeared with its implementation regulations, and the first urban plan of the city of Huedin in 1998 ultimately regulated these matters” (Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, May 2026).

He stated that many palaces had already been constructed before the adoption of Huedin’s first General Urban Plan in 1998. According to him, current controls are stricter: unauthorised works are stopped and fined, while continued construction may be referred to the prosecutor’s office. He also stated that palace owners were *“absolutely up to date with their taxes, fines, everything”* (Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, May 2026).

These statements do not establish whether every building corresponds fully to its approved design. Dohotaru highlighted this unresolved distinction:

“[...] does what was authorised match what is on the ground?” (Dohotaru, June 2026).

The legal status of the palace landscape cannot therefore be reduced to a single category without examining individual properties, permits, and planning documents. Dohotaru expressed similar caution regarding the origins of the money invested in the buildings:

“Those who go to work abroad, some beg or steal, others work in construction. So it needs to be examined; we have no evidence it was through theft, and that can be the kind of hasty generalisation. Because if they were stealing so well, they wouldn't have left the buildings as construction sites for over 30 years” (Dohotaru, June 2026).

The interviews also addressed differences within Huedin's Roma population. The municipal representative distinguished between wealthier palace households, whose members spend much of the year abroad, and Roma residents living in more precarious conditions beyond the railway line:

“There are two sides to the Roma ethnic group: those who have palaces and are wealthier and are always abroad, and the other side somewhere at the exit toward Zalău past the railway line [...] who have more precarious financial conditions” (Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, May 2026).

In the municipal interview, palace households were described as tax-compliant and integrated, whereas poorer Roma residents were more frequently discussed in relation to educational and administrative difficulties. Hence, the municipal representative associated integration with school attendance, tax payment, compliance with local regulations, and reduced visible differences in clothing and housing:

“They have been assimilated; they have been assimilated over time” (Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, May 2026).

Dohotaru offered a more critical interpretation, arguing that Roma people were often recognised in public discourse only through *“racialisation, poverty, or the criminalisation of an ethnic group”*. He also noted that earlier state policies had pursued integration through the loss of Roma identity (Dohotaru, June 2026).

Differences in interpretation were also evident in discussions of political representation. According to the municipal representative, at the time of the interview, no Roma representative sat on the local council:

“They try every year at the local elections to promote a candidate, but they have never succeeded, because they themselves are not very united” (Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, May 2026).

Communication between the municipality and Roma residents consequently relied on a small number of informal intermediaries:

“[...] we have about three or four with whom we speak all the time when there are problems or when we want to send a message to their community” (Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, May 2026).

Informal mediation also operated within the community. The household participant described her husband's role as *bulibaşa*:

“[...] there are some who do not understand. And my husband is the bulibaşa, meaning he is responsible for them. We argue with them, and then we make peace with them every day” (Household participant, May 2026).

The interviews point to differences in wealth, migration history, generation, and family affiliation. They also show the importance of informal intermediaries in relations among Roma residents and between residents and the

municipality. However, no individual participant or household can be assumed to represent the wider community.

4.3.3 From media visibility to negotiated tourism

The contrast between public visibility and control over representation was particularly evident in discussions of tourism. The municipal representative stated that the palaces already attract the attention of travellers passing through Huedin:

“There are many foreigners who pass through that area and stop at some point, take a photo, and move on. Being on the E60, even if you do not know they exist, you see them and you stop. You see something you do not see in every city” (Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, May 2026).

According to him, travellers stop briefly to photograph the façades before continuing their journeys, generally without interacting with residents or accessing local interpretation. This spontaneous visibility has not developed into an organised visitor experience. The municipal representative also rejected the use of the palaces as part of the official image of Huedin:

“[...] we would not want Huedin to be known for the Roma palaces [...]. We want to be seen as a city, as a gateway to the Apuseni Mountains, not for the Roma palaces” (Secretary General of Huedin Municipality, May 2026).

The household participant expressed greater openness towards visitors, although her position was grounded in personal hospitality rather than formal tourism:

“At this house both the poor and the wealthy, and the person in need, everyone has been welcomed” (Household participant, May 2026).

She also rejected the idea that receiving guests necessarily required payment:

“[...] I do not need money; come whenever you want” (Household participant, May 2026).

However, she distinguished welcoming visitors from transforming the house into a museum. The palace remained a private and inhabited family space. When asked whether other households might receive visitors, she replied:

“The others will not receive anyone [...]. They are afraid; it holds them back” (Household participant, May 2026).

This concern is consistent with the media representations examined in Section 4.2, in which residents were frequently presented through ridicule, suspicion, and sensationalism. External attention may therefore be perceived as a risk to privacy and control rather than as a tourism opportunity.

Dohotaru’s proposal sought to replace spontaneous observation with a mediated cultural experience. He stated that the initial proposal had received neither institutional support nor direct opposition:

“This brings me back to my original proposal, which neither received support nor opposition. It was simply ignored” (Dohotaru, June 2026).

He maintained that the palaces could be presented through an ethnographic and curatorial programme rather than merely photographed as unusual buildings. In his view, they should be interpreted not as a complete representation of Roma identity, but as “*representative points for a historical moment*” shaped by the conditions of the 1990s and early 2000s (Dohotaru, June 2026). Consent was presented as the first requirement:

“The first step is obtaining the agreement of a property owner and, more broadly, the agreement of the local community. If one owner says, ‘I am willing to open my palace to visitors’, that is the starting point” (Dohotaru, June 2026).

Dohotaru did not consider unanimous participation necessary for an initial pilot:

“Not the whole community needs to participate right now. In the first phase, you need one owner who makes their palace available for visiting” (Dohotaru, June 2026).

He also argued that participating residents should determine how the buildings and their inhabitants were represented:

“The community itself should decide what they want to display, what image they want to project, and how they wish to present themselves” (Dohotaru, June 2026).

Under this model, residents would act as hosts and interpreters rather than objects of observation. Family histories and local knowledge could be combined with contextual interpretation addressing migration, architecture, social inequality, and the wider cultural landscape of the Călata region. Dohotaru also proposed restricting photography to previously agreed spaces.

The interviews therefore indicate that the palaces already attract external attention, but that no shared institutional or community position on tourism currently exists. A future initiative would require willing households, trusted intermediaries, prior consent, a limited pilot format, agreed photography rules, and direct participation by residents in developing the visitor narrative.

4.4. SWOT analysis of tourism potential

The SWOT assessment shows that the tourism potential of the Huedin palaces derives less from their individual architectural features than from the relationship between visibility, accessibility, private ownership, and control over representation (Fig. 6). Their concentration along a major transit corridor makes them easy to encounter, but does not in itself create a tourism product. At present, visitors can observe the buildings from public space, yet there is no agreed framework for entering properties, interacting with residents, or understanding the social and historical context of the palace landscape.

S

Strengths

- Distinctive and recognisable architectural landscape, defined by turrets, layered roofs, ornamental façades, balconies, columns, and decorative metalwork
- Strong spatial concentration along the E60 corridor and, secondarily, on Horea Street, enabling the development of a compact and coherent visitor route
- High visibility from public space, with 64% of the palaces classified as highly or very highly visible, allowing exterior observation without entering private property
- Considerable architectural diversity, reflected in differences in scale, roof configuration, colours, façade treatment, and decorative density
- Rich cultural and social narratives concerning migration, family history, intergenerational investment, architectural choices, and changing social aspirations after 1989
- Initial openness to visitors expressed by at least one palace-owning household, providing a possible starting point for a pilot initiative

O

Opportunities

- Existing traveller flows along the E60 and proximity to Cluj-Napoca, providing access to a substantial potential visitor market
- Spontaneous visitor, media, and social-media interest, demonstrating that the palaces already attract attention beyond the local community
- Growing interest in cultural, experiential, and minority-heritage tourism, favouring experiences based on local narratives and direct interaction
- Potential integration into the tourism offer of Țara Călatei and the Apuseni region, complementing existing cultural and nature-based attractions
- Potential partnerships with universities, Roma cultural organisations, civil-society groups, tour operators, and cultural institutions
- Supportive national and European policy frameworks for Roma culture, minority heritage, cultural participation, and participatory heritage governance

W

Weaknesses

- Private residential character of the buildings, which limits access to interiors and requires the consent of each participating household
- Seasonal and intermittent occupancy, reducing the possibility of maintaining regular opening periods throughout the year
- Uneven completion and conservation, with several buildings unfinished, partly occupied, or still undergoing gradual construction
- Absence of agreed visitor-management arrangements, including booking, guiding, access, photography, safety, and revenue-sharing procedures
- Lack of a common position among palace owners regarding tourism development and public access
- Limited institutional support, as the municipality is reluctant to associate Huedin's official image and tourism promotion with the palaces
- Weak local tourism infrastructure and limited accommodation capacity, restricting longer stays and wider local economic benefits

T

Threats

- Persistent associations with criminality, illegality, welfare dependency, and aesthetic ridicule, reinforcing visitor prejudice
- Voyeuristic or intrusive visitation, including uncontrolled photography, filming, trespassing, and online circulation of domestic images
- Exoticisation and loss of community control if tourism narratives are shaped mainly by external actors
- Regulatory, safety, insurance, and liability requirements for opening private homes to visitors
- Competition from established destinations in Cluj-Napoca, Țara Călatei, and the Apuseni Mountains, reinforcing Huedin's transit role
- Renewed media controversies involving individual families or properties, undermining trust in tourism development

Fig. 6. SWOT analysis of the tourism potential of Roma palaces

The main strategic tension concerns the conversion of spontaneous curiosity into an organised experience without compromising privacy. Seasonal occupation, incomplete construction, and differences between households would make a standardised route difficult to implement. These conditions suggest that any initiative would need to operate through prior booking, small groups, and the participation of selected households rather than through unrestricted access or large-scale promotion. The willingness expressed by one household provides a possible starting point, but cannot be interpreted as wider community consent.

Institutional positioning is equally important. The municipality's reluctance to associate Huedin's official image with the palaces limits the prospects for a conventional place-branding strategy. At the same time, the absence of strong municipal leadership increases the importance of intermediaries capable of building trust between residents, researchers, cultural organisations, and tourism actors. Proximity to Cluj-Napoca and to established destinations in the Apuseni and Călata regions could generate visitor interest, but only if the palaces were incorporated into a broader cultural narrative rather than promoted as isolated architectural curiosities.

The greatest risk would be to expand visibility before establishing rules governing access, photography, interpretation, and the use of residents' stories. Such an approach could reproduce the same external gaze identified in the media analysis and reinforce stigma or exoticisation.

4.5. Proposals for culturally responsible tourism development

The findings suggest that the Roma palaces of Huedin could form part of a cultural tourism initiative, provided that their residential character and the preferences of participating households remain central to its design. The purpose would not be to transform private homes into conventional attractions, but to interpret selected buildings within the wider history of Huedin, including post-socialist change, migration, family investment, and changing architectural preferences. Such an approach would shift attention from visual spectacle towards dialogue and contextual understanding.

Participation would need to be voluntary and negotiated separately with each household. Most of the visit could take place from public streets, while entry into courtyards or interiors would be limited to properties whose owners had explicitly agreed to receive visitors. The format, duration, number of participants, spaces made accessible, and conditions for photography or recording would be established in advance. This would allow residents to retain control over their homes and over the personal or family information shared during the visit. The provisional routes shown in Fig. 7 indicate how the palaces could be connected with other places in Huedin.



Fig. 7. Proposed culturally responsible tourist routes integrating selected Roma palaces with the main cultural landmarks of Huedin

Route A, approximately 2.2 km long, follows the principal concentration of palaces along Horea Street and continues through adjacent streets towards the town centre. Route B, approximately 1 km long, offers a shorter itinerary linking the central palace cluster with the Reformed Church, the cultural centre, Barcsay Manor, Central Park, and the railway station. The routes are not proposed as fixed tourism products, but as possible frameworks that could be adjusted according to the participation of individual households and the practical conditions of each visit. Connecting the palaces with other landmarks would also reduce the risk of presenting them as isolated curiosities or as the sole defining feature of Huedin.

Interpretation would need to extend beyond the description of roofs, towers, colours, and decorative elements. The buildings could be discussed in relation to migration, family organisation, seasonal residence, social mobility, generational change, and the socioeconomic diversity of Huedin's Roma population.

A pilot initiative could begin with one or more willing households and a small number of pre-booked visits. Participating residents, local cultural actors, Roma organisations, and trained guides could jointly prepare the interpretive material and evaluate the experience after each initial visit. Temporary exhibitions, discussions, school activities, or cultural events could later broaden the programme beyond architecture. Any income generated should be distributed according to arrangements agreed in advance with participating households. Wider promotion would be considered only after the pilot had been evaluated by hosts and local partners.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings point to three related conclusions. First, the Huedin palaces share a recognisable architectural vocabulary, but their diversity and changing use do not support their interpretation as a fixed expression of Roma identity. Second, extensive media visibility has not produced cultural recognition or greater control by residents over the public interpretation of the buildings. Third, their possible inclusion in tourism depends less on promotion than on consent, representation, and the institutional arrangements through which access and interpretation would be negotiated.

5.1. The Huedin palaces in relation to the literature and comparable cases

The inventory confirms recurrent elements identified in earlier studies - monumental scale, layered roofs, turrets, balconies, intensive façade decoration - though their combinations, finishes, and spatial arrangements vary considerably across Huedin. The results thus support Preda et al.'s (2018) identification of a recognisable phenomenon, but caution against interpreting the phenomenon as a

uniform ethnic architectural style, since combinations and meanings vary between households.

Gräf (2008) and Preda et al. (2018) relate palace construction to socioeconomic status and the display of prosperity - an interpretation the Huedin findings broadly support, particularly where scale and ornamentation mark family achievement. Status alone, however, is incomplete: as shown in Section 4.3, the household interview linked the palace to inheritance, migration, and family life well beyond display value, including retrospective criticism of its cost. Architecture thus operated simultaneously as domestic space, investment, and competitive display - treating it mainly as a wealth display would reproduce the same reduction found in much of the media coverage.

Tomlinson's (2007) reading of the palaces as a claim to citizenship usefully frames architecture as public assertion rather than private consumption, a visibility intensified by their concentration along the E60. Yet this study cannot establish that owners intended such claims; their meanings appear more closely tied to family aspirations and local status, with wider political significance largely attributed by external observers - echoing Toma's (2020) warning that attention to conspicuous houses may obscure less visible processes. As shown in Section 4.3, seasonal use during weddings, funerals, and family gatherings suggests that limited year-round occupation does not equate to an absent social function, qualifying - though not eliminating - descriptions of some palaces as empty monuments to wealth (Ruegg, 2013; Toma, 2020).

The findings also reinforce Crețan and Powell's (2018) argument that economic advancement does not protect Roma households from stigmatisation: the media corpus repeatedly read visible prosperity as criminality or illegality rather than social mobility, while the interviews (Section 4.3) revealed internal socioeconomic differences obscured by treating the palaces as representative. The reported shift of younger generations toward smaller, functional houses further challenges any notion of an enduring tradition - the palaces are better understood as products of a specific post-1990 convergence of migration, family resources, and local competition.

5.2. From contested heritage to a cultural resource: racialisation, recognition, and the risks of touristification

Describing the palaces as contested minority-built heritage is analytically useful but does not imply that they possess an agreed heritage status. The concept identifies a conflict over cultural value, legitimacy, and interpretive authority rather than a formal designation. Liu et al. (2021) define contested heritage through competing meanings, while Waterton and Smith (2010) show how community heritage may be misrecognised when institutional categories privilege expert or majority definitions of cultural value. Huedin illustrates both processes: the palaces are highly visible and extensively debated, yet remain

outside official heritage frameworks, and the actors consulted do not express a shared position regarding their cultural status.

Media visibility also needs to be interpreted more critically than a simple distinction between positive and negative representation. Although the present study did not classify individual media items as racist, the recurrent association of Roma-built space with criminality, welfare dependency, illegality, and aesthetic deviance can be understood as a process of racialisation. Picker (2017) provides a broader urban framework for this interpretation, showing how Roma spaces can be constituted as exceptional or problematic in relation to dominant urban norms. Recent work on Eastern European urban marginality similarly treats racialisation as embedded in the production of postsocialist urban relations rather than as an external or secondary prejudice (Alexandrescu et al., 2025).

In Huedin, this process is visible in several recurrent shifts within the media corpus: allegations concerning named individuals became explanations for the wider palace landscape; departures from approved designs in particular cases were extended into claims of collective illegality; and architectural difference was repeatedly connected with judgements of 'bad taste', cultural foreignness, or abnormal wealth. The issue is therefore not simply that some reporting was negative. Ethnicity, built form, morality, and urban legitimacy were repeatedly brought together in ways that positioned the palace landscape as socially exceptional. This interpretation is also consistent with the contrast identified in the interviews between institutional language of assimilation and Dohotaru's explicit reference to the 'racialisation, poverty, or the criminalisation of an ethnic group'.

The 2021 tourism debate did not necessarily displace these representations. Instead, stigmatisation and exoticisation frequently coexisted. The shift from denigration to curiosity may appear more positive, but it can retain the same unequal relationship when Roma residents remain objects of observation and their architectural difference becomes a spectacle for external consumption. Tourism would therefore alter these relations only if greater visibility were accompanied by greater interpretive authority for participating residents. Research on ethnic neighbourhood tourism similarly shows that visitor economies can reshape both representation and the distribution of power and benefits between minority and majority groups (Maruyama et al., 2017).

Participation, however, should not imply the existence of a single community position. Palace-owning households, poorer Roma residents, informal leaders, younger family members, municipal institutions, and civic actors occupy different social and economic positions and may attach different meanings to the palaces. The willingness of one household to receive visitors cannot therefore constitute collective consent. A culturally responsible initiative would need to recognise this internal diversity and establish participation, access,

interpretation, and any economic benefits through negotiated arrangements with the people directly involved.

5.3. Place branding, representation, and local identity

The palaces already shape Huedin's external image, but visibility alone does not legitimise an official brand. Farhat (2019) frames place branding as contested cultural politics, and Jiménez-Esquinas & Sánchez-Carretero (2018) question who has authority to turn place identities into marketable resources - directly relevant where the image circulating through media differs from the municipality's promoted identity. From this perspective, place branding is not a neutral act of promotion: selecting the palaces as a defining image of Huedin could transform an already externalised and partly racialised gaze into an institutional territorial narrative.

The municipality's preference for presenting Huedin as a gateway to the Apuseni Mountains does not erase the palaces' visual prominence, but nor should they define the town in isolation: a singular brand risks reducing both Huedin and its Roma population to a spectacular image, reinforcing the false impression that palace-owning households represent local Roma culture as a whole, despite the differences identified in the interviews (Section 4.3). A plural territorial identity - placing the palaces alongside the town's Romanian, Hungarian, Roma, and Călata-region histories - would be more defensible.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the Huedin palaces' spatial and architectural characteristics, the media frames shaping their public visibility, and the conditions for their inclusion in a culturally responsible visitor initiative. The findings resist a single interpretation, instead showing a built environment shaped by post-socialist migration, family resources, changing residential practices, and unequal public representation.

The inventory identified a recognisable but non-uniform architectural landscape: their concentration along Horea Street (E60), with recurring multi-tiered roofs, towers, balconies, and elaborate façades, makes the palaces a prominent element of Huedin's urban image, while variation in scale, construction stage, and condition means they should not be treated as a standardised type or a stable expression of Roma identity.

Comparing media coverage with local stakeholder perspectives revealed a clear difference in emphasis. Media attention was largely event-driven and centred on conflict, legality, conspicuous wealth, migration, criminality, and spectacle, whereas the interviews highlighted inheritance, work abroad, seasonal return, hospitality, and internal socioeconomic differences. More importantly, the recurrent movement from allegations concerning particular individuals or buildings to collective representations of Roma-built space points to a racialising

pattern in which ethnicity becomes linked to judgements about legality, wealth, aesthetics, and urban legitimacy. Stigmatisation and exoticisation should therefore not be understood as simple opposites: both can reproduce unequal forms of representation when residents have limited authority over how their homes and identities are publicly interpreted.

Architectural distinctiveness alone does not create heritage status or a viable tourism product. Any future initiative would need to be voluntary, small-scale, and grounded in explicit owner consent, negotiated access, agreed photography rules, and residents' direct participation in selecting what is shown to visitors - a limited pilot with willing households, not unrestricted visitation or a singular Huedin brand, with the buildings read within the town's and the Călata region's wider social and cultural landscape rather than as a comprehensive stand-in for Roma culture.

Given the single-case design and the limited number of interviews, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than representative of all Roma palace landscapes.

The Roma palaces of Huedin are neither merely architectural curiosities nor automatically heritage or tourism resources. Their future public significance will depend on whether residents are recognised not as objects of observation, but as participants with authority over access, interpretation, and representation.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Cristina Berendi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; *Ainhoa-Naomi Cristurean*: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft; *Ștefan-Alexandru Moroianu*: Investigation, Data curation, Visualization; *Matei-Virgiliu Bindea-Mihaiu*: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing - original draft; *Denisa-Mihaela Bocșe*: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing - original draft; *Denis Mihaly*: Investigation; *Marian-Dorel Sighiartău*:

Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Investigation, Writing - original draft, Supervision; *Cristian-Emanuel Adorean*: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Supervision.

Statement on the use of generative artificial intelligence

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) to assist with language editing, restructuring, and translation. These tools were not used to generate research data or to make analytical or interpretive decisions. The authors subsequently reviewed and revised all AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Inventory of media items included in the analysis

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
1	Dan Calin (Blog)	Romania	05.05.2010	Gypsy Palaces in Huedin (Palate de tigani in Huedin)	https://www.dancalin.ro/gipsy-houses-from-huedin/	Portfolio / Photography: visual documentary essay with architectural details and facades of Roma-style buildings in Huedin	Nu	2
2	Huedinul (Blogspot)	Romania	17.10.2011	In Huedin, the Roma Have Built 100 Palaces (In Huedin, tiganii au ridicat 100 de palate)	https://huedinul.blogspot.com/2011/10/in-huedin-tiganii-au-ridicat-100-de.html	Community / Local: inventory of the scale of construction; criticism of the urban appearance and the source of funds; local tensions	Da	3
3	Stiri de Cluj	Romania	24.10.2011	Huedin Has 96 Gypsy Palaces! The Town Hall Wants a New Urban Plan to Ban Them, but Has No Money VIDEO (In Huedin sunt 96 de palate tiganesti! Primaria vrea un nou PUG pentru a le interzice, dar nu are bani VIDEO)	https://www.stiridecluj.ro/social/in-huedin-sunt-96-de-palate-tiganesti-primaria-vrea-un-nou-pug-pentru-a-le-interzice-dar-nu-are-bani-video	Urban planning / Administration: inventory of 96 unauthorised palaces; the town hall wants PUG regulation, lack of funds	Da	3
4	Evenimentul Zilei	Romania	26.10.2011	Mayors Shrug Their Shoulders at the Gypsy	https://evz.ro/primarii-ridica-din-umeri-in-fata-	Administration / Urban planning: powerlessness of	Da	3

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				Turrets (Primarii ridica din umeri in fata turnuletelor tiganesti)	turnuletelor-tiganesti-951290.html	local authorities in enforcing construction discipline and controlling the legality of the palaces		
5	Ziua de Cluj	Romania	27.02.2012	The Roma Palaces of Huedin, Built with Stolen Money VIDEO (Palatele tromilor din Huedin, ridicate din bani de furat VIDEO)	https://zcj.ro/eveniment/--85108.html	Crime / Social: British investigations (Daily Mail) into gangs financing the Huedin villas with money obtained through theft	Da	3
6	Adevarul	Romania	21.03.2012	BBC on the Trail of the Roma with Palaces in Huedin (BBC, pe urmele tiganilor cu palate din Huedin)	https://adevarul.ro/stiri-interne/societate/bbc-pe-urmele-tiganilor-cu-palate-din-huedin-1249862.html	Society / International media: BBC report on the Rostas clan from Huedin, accused of theft in England	Da	3
7	Kanal D	Romania	19.03.2012	They Beg in England and Build Palaces in Romania. See How the Residences Appear in Huedin (In Anglia cersesc, iar in Romania isi fac palate. Uite cum apar resedintele in Huedin)	https://www.kanald.ro/in-anglia-cersesc-iar-in-romania-isi-fac-palate-uite-cum-apar-resedintele-in-huedin-16708240	Social / Report: socioeconomic contrast between activities in the diaspora (begging, theft) and the opulence of properties back home	Da	3
8	Stirile ProTV	Romania	31.03.2012	Mountains of Money Amid Appalling Filth. How the Money for the Gypsy Palaces of	https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/international/munti-de-bani-intr-o-mizerie-crunta-cum-sunt-munciti-banii-	Society / Crime: money from thefts in the UK invested in palaces; context of the BBC report	Da	3

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				Huedin Is Earned (Munti de bani intr-o mizerie crunta. Cum sunt munciti banii pentru palatele tiganesti din Huedin)	pentru-palatele-tiganesti-din-huedin.html			
9	Stiri de Cluj	Romania	31.03.2012	These Are the Roma of Huedin Who Rob England! They Live in Utter Poverty Abroad, in Romania They Build Palaces PHOTO (Ei sunt tiganii din Huedin care fura Anglia! Afara traiesc intr-o saracie lucie, in Romania ridica palate FOTO)	https://www.stiridecluj.ro/social/ei-sunt-tiganii-din-huedin-care-fura-anglia-afara-traiesc-intr-o-saracie-lucie-in-romania-ridica-palate-foto	Crime / Social: stark contrast between precarious living conditions in the British diaspora and massive investments in domestic villas	Da	3
10	Gazeta de Cluj	Romania	19.04.2012	The Palaces of Huedin Were Built with Stolen Money (Palatele din Huedin au fost construite cu bani furati)	https://gazetadecluj.ro/palatele-din-huedin-au-fost-construite-cu-bani-furati/	Crime / Social: members of the Rostas clan imprisoned in Great Britain; money from thefts sent home to build palaces	Da	3
11	Adevarul	Romania	29.01.2013	The Roma of Huedin: Thieves in England, Kings in Their Palaces at Home and Stars on BBC and Daily Mail (Tiganii din Huedin:	https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/cluj-napoca/foto-tiganii-din-huedin-hoti-in-anglia-regi-in-1404901.html	Society / Crime: palaces as a symbol of money from crimes in the UK; headline with negative connotations	Da	3

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				hoti in Anglia, regi in palatele de acasa si vedete la BBC si Daily Mail)				
12	Adevarul	Romania	30.01.2013	PHOTO The Top Roma Palaces. A Spectacle of Opulence and Kitsch Across the Country (FOTO Topul palatelor romilor. Spectacol de opulenta si kitsch in toata tara)	https://adevarul.ro/stiri-interne/societate/foto-topul-palatelor-romilor-spectacol-de-1404999.html	Report-national inventory: Roma palaces across several counties (Cluj/Huedin, Sibiu, Arad, etc.); associations with crime, kitsch, contrast between palaces and hovels	Da	3
13	Stiri de Huedin	Romania	17.11.2015	The Palaces of Huedin, a Never-Ending Story (Palatele din Huedin, o poveste fara sfarsit)	https://stiridinhuedin.ro/palatele-din-huedin-o-poveste-fara-sfarsit/	Local / Social: long-running report on the ongoing controversies surrounding the Roma palaces in Huedin; multiple perspectives from the local community	Da	2
14	All Things Romania	International (blog)	25.02.2016	Gypsy Palaces in Huedin	https://kingofromania.com/2016/02/25/gypsy-palaces-in-huedin/	Tourism / Culture: architectural description of the palaces; comparison with ostentatious Western style; ironic-amused tone	Nu	2
15	Actual de Cluj	Romania	01.09.2019	A Roma Palace in Huedin Caught Fire (Un palat al romilor din Huedin a luat foc)	https://actualdecluj.ro/un-palat-al-romilor-din-huedin-a-luat-foc/	Miscellaneous / Security: fire at the Barnel clan's house; mentions palaces built without authorisation	Nu	2

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
16	Alamy	International	13.10.2019	Luxurious House of Roma People Called Tiganesti Palace in Huedin, Romania	https://www.alamy.com/luxurious-house-of-roma-people-called-tiganesti-palace-in-huedin-romania-image351765882.html	Stock photo / Editorial: commercial visual resource illustrating the architecture of the palaces in Huedin; purely factual description	Nu	2
17	Financial Times	International (UK)	2020	The Gaudy, Joyful Palaces of the Roma	https://www.ft.com/content/018da609-0ab5-4fdc-9300-b6a30e7b977c	Culture / Architecture: positive presentation of the Roma palaces as a vibrant and exuberant cultural expression	Nu	1
18	Info Huedin	Romania	12.06.2021	A Former MP Would Like the Roma Palaces of Huedin to Become a Brand for Cluj (Un fost deputat ar vrea ca palatele rromilor din Huedin sa devina brand al Clujului)	https://infohuedin.ro/un-fost-deputat-ar-vrea-ca-palatele-rromilor-din-huedin-sa-devina-brand-al-clujului/	Tourism / Local: local publication from Huedin picks up Dohotaru's guided tours proposal; neutral presentation for the local community	Da	2
19	Foia Transilvana	Romania	13.06.2021	A Hallucinatory Proposal by a Cluj Environmental Activist: Should the Gypsy Palaces of Huedin Become a Brand for Cluj? (Propunere halucinanta a unui activist de mediu din Cluj: Palatele tiganesti din	https://foaiatransilvana.ro/propunere-halucinanta-a-unui-activist-de-mediu-din-cluj-palatele-tiganesti-din-huedin-sa-devina-un-brand-al-clujului/	Tourism: the tone of the headline suggests a sceptical/negative reaction to the civic initiative	Da	3

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				Huedin sa devina un brand al Clujului?)				
20	Monitorul de Cluj	Romania	13.06.2021	The Gypsy Palaces, a New Brand for Cluj: Would Foreigners Prefer Casa Matei or the Palaces? PHOTO GALLERY (Palatele tiganesti, un nou brand al Clujului: Strainii ar prefera Casa Matei sau palatele? GALERIE FOTO)	https://www.monitorulcluj.ro/actualitate/91008-palatele-tiganesti-un-nou-brand-al-clujului-strainii-ar-prefera-casa-matei-sau-palatele-foto	Tourism: debate on branding opportunity; comparison with other Cluj attractions; sceptical tone	Da	3
21	Adevarul	Romania	15.06.2021	A Controversial Proposal Made by a Former MP. What If the Gypsy Palaces of Huedin Became a Brand for Cluj? (Propunere controversata facuta de un fost deputat. Ce ar fi daca palatele tiganesti din Huedin ar deveni un brand al Clujului?)	https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/cluj-napoca/propunere-controversata-facuta-de-un-fost-deputat-2101487.html	Tourism: Adrian Dohotaru's proposal for the Roma palaces to become a symbol of Transylvania; public debate	Da	2
22	Libertatea	Romania	15.06.2021	A Former MP Proposes That the Roma Palaces of Huedin Become a	https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/adrian-dohotaru-propune-ca-palatele-romilor-din-huedin-sa-	Tourism / Politics: presentation of the Dohotaru initiative; cites a poll showing 80% social	Da	2

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				Brand for Cluj (Un fost deputat propune ca palatele romilor din Huedin sa devina un brand al Clujului)	devina-un-brand-al-clujului-3602655	rejection of the Roma ethnicity		
23	Universul.net	Romania	15.06.2021	Former USR MP, Controversial Proposal: What If the Gypsy Palaces of Huedin Became a Brand for Cluj? (Fost deputat USR, propunere controversata: Ce ar fi daca palatele tiganesti din Huedin ar deveni un brand al Clujului?)	https://universul.net/fost-deputat-usr-propunere-controversata-ce-ar-fi-daca-palatele-tiganesti-din-huedin-ar-deveni-un-brand-al-clujului/	Tourism: reiteration of Dohotaru's proposal; headline underlines its controversial nature	Da	2
24	Click	Romania	15.06.2021	Proposal. The Roma Palaces of Huedin as a Tourist Attraction, with Guided Tours for Foreigners (Propunere. Palatele romilor din Huedin, obiectiv turistic, cu tururi ghidate pentru straini)	https://click.ro/actualitate/national/propunere-palatele-romilor-din-huedin-obiectiv-7517.html	Tourism: brief presentation of the guided tours proposal at the Roma palaces	Da	2
25	Monden	Romania	15.06.2021	The Gypsy Palaces of Huedin Could Become a Symbol for Cluj! What Adrian Dohotaru	https://www.monden.ro/palatele-tiganesti-din-huedin-ar-putea-deveni-un-simbol-pentru-cluj-ce-	Tourism / Branding: presentation of Dohotaru's proposal to transform the	Da	2

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				Proposes (Palatele tiganesti din Huedin ar putea deveni un simbol pentru Cluj! Ce propune Adrian Dohotaru)	propune-adrian-dohotaru.html	palaces into a symbol of Cluj		
26	Stiri de Cluj	Romania	15.06.2021	Former MP Adrian Dohotaru Calls for the Roma Palaces of Huedin to Become a Brand for Cluj (PHOTO) (Fostul deputat Adrian Dohotaru cere ca palatele romilor de la Huedin sa devina brand al Clujului (FOTO))	https://www.stiridecluj.ro/politic/fostul-deputat-adrian-dohotaru-cere-ca-palatele-romilor-de-la-huedin-sa-devina-brand-al-clujului-foto	Politics / Tourism: account of the public proposal for guided tours; mentions hostility in IRES surveys	Da	2
27	Gandul	Romania	15.06.2021	The Proposal of a Former MP: What If the Gypsy Palaces of Huedin Became a Brand for Cluj? (Propunerea unui fost deputat: Ce ar fi daca palatele tiganesti din Huedin ar deveni un brand al Clujului?)	https://www.gandul.ro/actualitate/propunerea-unui-fost-deputat-ce-ar-fi-daca-palatele-tiganesti-din-huedin-ar-deveni-un-brand-al-clujului-19645807	Politics / Social: coverage of the Facebook debate on integrating informal heritage into tourism; neutral rendering without editorial comment	Da	2
28	Monitorul de Cluj	Romania	16.06.2021	The Roma Palaces of Huedin on the List of	https://www.monitorulcj.ro/actualitate/91086-	Tourism: proposal to integrate Roma palaces	Da	3

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				Tourist Attractions in Cluj. Mayor: I Find It Inappropriate. I Think It's a Joke (Palatele rromilor din Huedin, pe lista obiectivelor turistice din Cluj. Primar: Mi se pare deplasat. Eu cred ca este o gluma)	palatele-rromilor-din-huedin-pe-lista-obiectivelor-turistice-din-cluj-primar-mi-se-pare-deplasat-eu-cred-ca-este-o-gluma	into a tourist route; negative reaction from the mayor of Huedin		
29	Antena 3	Romania	16.06.2021	A Cluj Activist Proposes That the Roma Palaces Become Tourist Attractions (Un activist din Cluj propune ca palatele romilor sa devina obiective turistice: Mostenirea lor ar fi pretuita)	https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/social/activist-cluj-palate-romi-obiective-turistice-604788.html	Tourism / Social: proposal for tourist attractions; emphasis on Roma cultural heritage as a value	Da	2
30	Realitatea.net	Romania	16.06.2021	A Former MP Proposes That the Roma Palaces Near Cluj Be Used as Tourist Attractions (Un fost parlamentar propune ca palatele romilor din zona Clujului sa fie utilizate)	https://www.realitatea.net/stiri/actual/un-fost-parlamentar-propune-ca-palatelor-romilor-din-zona-clujului-sa-fie-utilizate-si-ca-obiective-turistice_60c9bd02e45acb1f5f718570	Tourism: neutral presentation of the proposal to exploit the Roma palaces for tourism	Da	2

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				si ca obiective turistice)				
31	Gazeta de Transilvania	Romania	16.06.2021	The Gypsy Palaces of Huedin, a Brand for Cluj? The Proposal of a Cluj Activist (Palatele tiganesti din Huedin, un brand al Clujului? Propunerea unui activist clujean)	https://gazetadetransilvania.ro/palatele-tiganesti-din-huedin-un-brand-al-clujului-propunerea-unui-activist-clujean/	Tourism / Territorial branding: presentation of the activist's proposal; neutral-interrogative tone	Da	2
32	Observator News	Romania	16.06.2021	The Roma Palaces of Huedin Proposed for the List of Tourist Attractions. Local Authorities Refuse to Hear of It (Palatele romilor din Huedin, propuse pe lista obiectivelor turistice. Autoritatile locale nici nu vor sa auda)	https://observatornews.ro/veniment/palatele-romilor-din-huedin-propuse-pe-lista-obiectivelor-turistice-autoritatile-locale-nici-nu-vor-sa-auda-424722.html	Administration / Social: open conflict between the activist's proposal and the outright refusal of the Huedin municipality	Da	3
33	Cluj Capitala	Romania	16.06.2021	Cluj. The Roma Palaces of Huedin Proposed for the List of Tourist Attractions. Owner: I Took a Model from the Internet, We Like Versace (Cluj. Palatele	https://clujcapitala.ro/2021/06/16/cluj-palatele-romilor-din-huedin/	Tourism / Local development: Dohotaru's proposal to include the approximately 80 palaces on the list of tourist attractions; the mayor considers the proposal a joke	Da	1

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				romilor din Huedin, propuse pe lista obiectivelor turistice. Proprietar: Am luat un model dupa interneturi, ne place Versaci)				
34	Kanal D Romania (Youtube)	Romania	27.06.2021	This Is Romania - Luxury and Wealth in the Roma Palaces! It's the Louvre Here! (Asta-i Romania - Lux si bogatie in palatele rromilor! Aici este la Luvru!)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6LaVwns2WI	Entertainment / TV report: programme dedicated to the Roma palaces; sensationalist tone; comparison with the Louvre; presentation as a spectacular phenomenon	Nu	2
35	Adevarul	Romania	10.09.2023	Spanish Vlogger Goes Viral on TikTok After Filming Several Roma Palaces in the Country (Vloggerita spaniola, virala pe TikTok dupa ce a filmat mai multe palate ale romilor din tara)	https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/cluj- napoca/vloggerita-spaniola-virala-pe-tik-tok-dupa-ce-a-2298753.html	Social media / Viral phenomenon: TikTok clip by Spanish vlogger Dana Lucia Sandoval; external perception of the opulence; debate about the veracity of the rule one floor = one million	Da	2
36	Cluj Capitala	Romania	11.09.2023	(Video) The Roma Palaces of Huedin Are Going Viral on TikTok. A Spanish Vlogger Filmed Them (Video) Palatele	https://clujcapitala.ro/2023/09/11/video-palatele-romilor-din-huedin-fac-senzatie-pe-tiktok-o-vloggerita-din-spania-le-a-filmata-fiecare-nivel-de-	Entertainment / Social: international viral success of the Huedin palaces on TikTok; admiration of foreign tourists	Nu	1

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				romilor din Huedin fac senzatie pe TikTok. O vloggerita din Spania le-a filmat)	acoperis-un-milion-de-euro-aceasta-familie-are-sase/			
37	Gabriela Travels	International (blog)	23.04.2024	The Gypsy Palaces of Huedin, Romania	https://gabrielastravels.wordpress.com/2024/05/23/the-gypsy-palaces-of-huedin-romania/	Tourism / Travel blog: description of a tourist visit to the palaces; personal perspective of a foreign traveller	Nu	1
38	Europe Between East and West	International (blog)	03.12.2024	Gilded Mysteries - The Gypsy Palaces of Huedin (Lost Lands #195)	https://europebetweeneastandwest.wordpress.com/2024/12/03/gilded-mysteries-the-gypsy-palaces-of-huedin-lost-lands-195/	Tourism / Culture: history and travel blog; the palaces as a distinctive architectural attraction in Central Europe	Nu	1
39	Clujenii.ro	Romania	17.02.2025	The Roma Palaces of Huedin - Why the Proposal to Turn the Palaces into Tourist Attractions Came to Nothing - PHOTO (Palatele romilor din Huedin - De ce s-a ales praful de propunerea ca palatele sa devina obiective turistice - FOTO)	https://clujenii.ro/palatele-romilor-din-huedin-de-ce-s-a-ales-praful-de-propunerea-ca-palatele-sa-devina-obiective-turistice-foto/	Tourism / Retrospective: analysis of the failure of the 2021 proposal; current state of the palaces; negative assessment	Nu	3
40	Clujenii.ro	Romania	06.06.2025	The Project Came to Nothing! The Palaces	https://clujenii.ro/s-a-ales-praful-de-proiect-palatele-	Report / Local news (Social/Tourism):	Da	3

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
				of the Roma Kings of Huedin Proposed for the List of Tourist Attractions (S-a ales praful de proiect! Palatele regilor romi din Huedin propuse pe lista obiectivelor turistice)	regilor-romi-din-huedin-propuse-pe-lista-obiectivelor-turistice-ne-am-inspirat-de-pe-interneturi-ne-place-versace-foto/	abandonment of the project to include the palaces in a tourist circuit; directly opposing positions between civic activists and the mayor of Huedin		
41	Adevarul	Romania	19.06.2025	The Secrets of the Extravagant Palaces Built by the Roma in the 90s (Secretele palatelor extravagante ridicate de romi in 90: Pentru noi, moartea lui Ceausescu nu a schimbat mare lucru)	https://adevarul.ro/stiri-interne/societate/secretele-palatelor-extravagante-ridicate-de-romi-2451688.html	Social analysis / Report: emergence of Roma palaces in the 1990s, sources of enrichment (metals, smuggling), migration to France; mentions violent ethnic conflicts and administrative tensions	Da	3
42	Roma's Stories	International (blog)	N/A	The Romas: From a Tent to Palace	https://www.romastories.ro/en/the-romas-from-a-tent-to-palace/	Culture / Roma identity: evolution of Roma habitat from nomadism to contemporary palaces; inclusive perspective	Nu	1
43	Travel 2 Unlimited	International (blog)	N/A	Romania: Huedin	https://travel2unlimited.com/romania-huedin/	Tourism: general presentation of Huedin as a tourist destination, including the Roma palaces	Nu	1

No.	Newspaper / Platform	Country	Date	Article Title	URL	News Type	Conflict	Code
44	Adevarul	Romania	N/A	Huedin, the Smallest Town in Cluj County. The Town with a Hundred Palaces Built from Begging and Theft in England (Huedin, cel mai mic oras din judetul Cluj)	https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/cluj-napoca/huedin-cel-mai-mic-oras-din-judetul-cluj-1613402.html	Local / Social: monographic and administrative data about the locality; description of local urban characteristics	Nu	2
45	Click	Romania	N/A	A Spanish Vlogger Stunned Her Fans After Filming the Roma Palaces in Our Country (O vloggerita din Spania si-a uimit fanii dupa ce a filmat palatele romilor din tara noastra)	https://click.ro/actualitate-national/o-vloggerita-din-spania-si-a-uimit-fanii-dupa-ce-a-2298789.html	Entertainment / Social: reaction of the international public to TikTok content presenting the architecture of the palaces	Nu	1
46	Info Huedin	Romania	N/A	Huedin, Romania - From a Provincial Town to a Surprise on the International Media Stage (Huedin, Romania - De la oras provincial la surpriza pe scena media internationala)	https://infohuedin.ro/huedin-romania-de-la-oras-provincial-la-surpriza-pe-scena-media-internationala/	Local / Media: analysis of the international media impact of the Roma palaces; Huedin from an anonymous town to a global subject	Nu	1

Appendix B. Stakeholder-Specific Semi-Structured Interview Questions on Roma Palaces in Huedin

No.	Interview at the town hall
1	How does the local council view the phenomenon of the Roma palaces in Huedin? (cultural heritage, an expression of identity, an urban planning issue, or something else?)
2	Why do you think the phenomenon of Roma palaces has become so prominent in Huedin compared to other towns in the country that have significant Roma communities?
3	How has this area developed since 1990? Did the current residents live here before, or was there a process of migration and urban expansion?
4	How do the city's residents view these buildings? Are there any differences between the local community's perception and the administration's official stance?
5	Are there any specific regulations or difficulties relating to the authorisation and inspection of these buildings? (differences between the plans and the final construction, unauthorised extensions, subsequent regularisation)
6	Does the General Urban Plan deal with the palace district separately? Are there any strategies for integrating these neighbourhoods into the city's future development?
7	What impact do these buildings have on the city's infrastructure? (water, sewerage, electricity, traffic, safety)
8	Are there any administrative or tax-related difficulties associated with the registration and taxation of these buildings?
9	Has there been any dialogue between the local council and Roma community leaders regarding the development of these areas?
10	How is the administration trying to address this issue without perpetuating stereotypes or stigmatising the Roma community?
11	Do you think these palaces could become part of the city's cultural or tourist identity?
12	What sort of economic activities support the construction of these palaces, and to what extent are these families integrated into the social and economic life of the city?
	Interview with/at bulibaşa palace
1	How did the story of this palace begin? (Who built it, when, and why?)
2	What does this house mean to the family? (a symbol of success, a legacy, prestige, protection for the family, or some other significance)
3	Are there any features of the palace that have special significance? (decorations, towers, colours, materials, symbols)
4	Was the building inspired by other palaces or by experiences abroad?
5	Do you consider these palaces to be part of the Roma identity in Huedin?
6	How does the Roma community view the difference between an ordinary house and a palace?

7	How has the Roma community in Huedin changed over the last few decades? (lifestyle, occupations, migration, education)
8	Do you feel that there are prejudices surrounding these buildings or the Roma community?
9	Would you be open to the idea of your palace being included in a cultural or tourist itinerary?
10	What would you like visitors to understand about the Roma community after they have visited your home?
	Interview with Adrian Dohotaru
1	In 2021, you proposed that the Roma palaces in Huedin should become a ‘brand of Cluj’. What does this actually mean?
2	In your opinion, what features make the Roma palaces in Huedin distinctive enough to serve as a symbol of the county?
3	Do you feel that Roma heritage is under-represented in the public image of Cluj and Transylvania?
4	What, in fact, was the problem you were trying to address with this proposal? The lack of visibility of the Roma community? Prejudice? The lack of original cultural products? Something else?
5	Have you received any feedback from the Roma community in Huedin? How did they view this idea?
6	Why do you think the proposal has provoked such a strong negative reaction?
7	Do you think that Romani palaces can be regarded as cultural heritage, even if they do not meet the traditional criteria for architectural heritage?
8	If the local authority had been open to the idea, what would have been the first practical step towards turning this vision into a real project?
9	What conditions would have had to be met for the owners of the palaces to be genuine partners in such an endeavour, rather than merely its subjects?
10	Now, five years on, do you think the idea is still viable?
11	Do you speak about this community from within or from outside - and do you think that makes a difference to the legitimacy of the initiative?
12	Who should control the narrative surrounding this ‘brand’ - activists, the authorities, or the Roma community alone?
13	Isn’t there a risk that such an initiative might romanticise poverty or social inequality, turning it into a sort of spectacle for tourists?
14	Why do you think the local council is reluctant to accept such a proposal? Is it a lack of vision, institutional bias or political calculation?
15	Where did you get the idea from? Was it something that just came to you, or did you see examples of best practice elsewhere?