

Migrant integration in Romania: bridging theory, data and individual narratives

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Thesis summary

Disclaimer

The present thesis summary contains abridged content from the thesis of the same name. Please feel free to consult the thesis for further coverage of topics covered in this thesis.

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Context

Migration has emerged as a contentious, politicized yet rewarding topic of academic enquiry amid rapid demographic, social and political changes taking place in Europe as a whole, and in Romania in particular. The immigration of non-ethnic Romanian, non-EU foreigners is a comparatively new phenomenon within Romania, but one that will increasingly shape the institutional architecture of the country and society as a whole. In recent years, the number of foreigners living long-term within the country has been increasing at an unprecedented rate, even if overall numbers remain small by European standards. Nevertheless, the country is now likely at the cusp of significant social, economic and political changes. These changes are not wholly unpredictable, however, as Romania stands to benefit from the experience of so many other European countries which have already gone through the same process, decades in advance. An extensive body of literature is likely to help guide both policy and research, as Romania gradually reaches key benchmarks in the story of its transformation to a destination-country for international migrants.

Immigration is a fairly new research topic, due in part to the small-scale of the phenomenon thus far. Indeed, like in much of Central and Eastern Europe, migration – as a topic – has been broadly dominated by the subject of emigration, not immigration. Nevertheless, after the end of the 2008 financial crisis, Central and Eastern countries in the EU consolidated its overall convergence with the Western member states. More advanced economies such as Czechia, Slovenia, Lithuania and Estonia are now converging with or even surpassing countries in Southern Europe in terms of overall economic development. And while hundreds of thousands of Poles, Romanians, Bulgarians, Croatians, Lithuanians and others have left countries in the region to settle in developed economies in the West, there are growing signs that the trends are reversing. In fact, countries such as Lithuania now have a positive migratory balance.

Even Romania has seen a sharp rise in the number of foreign-born residents in the past few years, both from the influx of genuine foreigners and due to re-migration by families from the Romanian diaspora which also repatriate their foreign-born children.

Country/Year	2013	2018	Country	2013	2018
Romania	19,862,852	19,013,651	Russia	4,952	7,189
Moldova	59,670	199,703	Greece	4,085	6,864

Italy	22,486	62,914	China	2,978	5,473
Spain	18,827	47,311	USA	2,360	4,888
Ukraine	8,743	24,570	Israel	1,665	3,660
United Kingdom	2,604	21,050	Syria	2,295	3,358
Germany	3,759	20,168	Belgium	54	3,269
France	3,780	15,867	Ireland	3,780	2,632
Bulgaria	11,163	10,543	Serbia	1,529	2,465
Hungary	5,795	8,648	Austria	121	2,084
Turkey	5,057	7,901	Iraq	1,136	2,045

Even so, the number of foreign-born residents of non-Romanian origin is rapidly increasing as well. This budding community is heterogenous and of diverse origins, with no large macro-communities of origin having formed as of this time.

Research question

The thesis, which is exploratory in nature and follows a „taught thesis” model has a primary research question that is underpinned by several sub-questions that are explored in distinct chapters.

The primary research question is: What are the key avenues of integration for non-EU migrants in Romania?

The sub-questions, which are explored in distinct parts of the interview tool, include:

- Why do non-EU citizens with no ethnic Romanian roots decide to migrate to Romania?
- How do they experience the administrative process of moving to Romania?
- How is the institution of marriage/cohabitation and family formation shaped by migration in a Romanian setting?
- What are the mechanisms that facilitate the access of migrants to heterogenous social networks in Romania?.
- How do EU migrants in Romania integrate into the labour market?

The status quo – existing literature and data

Literature on immigration as a social, economic and political phenomenon is extensive, and has been broadly expanded since the topic was first discussed in the 19th century. Initially, literature focused on rural to urban migration that was associated with the industrial revolution, but more recent researchers have expanded to cover trans-national migration. For many decades, the classical case study was the United States and its melting pot culture, but research has gradually included Europe as a reference point.

A modern example of a theoretical framework for mapping migration with a stronger emphasis on the condition of the individual is the push-pull theory developed by Everett Lee in 1966. The crux of the theory is modelling the decision to migrate by analysing the country-of-origin factors (the „push”), the country-of-destination factors (the „pull”) as well as ancillary aspects such as the likely obstacles and the personal reasons of the individual that is migrating. While the theory is fairly straightforward, it delves into some interesting considerations, including the role of nostalgia for the country of origin (where the formative years, often bearing minimal personal responsibilities, are spent) in fostering integration in a new society. Lee also points out that the role of subjective knowledge means that the decision to migrate is not entirely rational and should not be treated as such in research endeavours.

When it comes to integration, this can be cultural and social or economic in nature. These do not necessarily overlap. A comprehensive model on integration was proposed by Gordon (1964). He identified several stages of integration, including:

- 1) Changes in cultural patterns (including religious belief and observance) to match those of the host society – cultural or behavioural assimilation
- 2) Taking on large-scale primary group relationships with persons from the dominant cultural group, i.e. entering fully into the societal network of groups and institutions, or societal structure of the host country –structural assimilation
- 3) Non-restricted intermarriage – marital assimilation
- 4) Development of a localized sense of peoplehood, or ethnicity - identification assimilation
- 5) The disappearance of discriminatory behaviour [towards the migrant-origin group] – behaviour receptional assimilation
- 6) The disappearance of prejudiced attitudes – attitude receptional assimilation

- 7) Do not make demands of an identitarian nature nor challenge the traditional values of the local society – civic assimilation

Other researchers have covered issues such as family formation, with Lucassen and Laarman (2009) focusing on multigenerational endogamy in migrant-origin communities in Western Europe, focusing on the role of religion as a possible factor in mal integration in this area.

When it comes to economic integration, in addition to literature there is extensive data collected by Eurostat and other bodies, covering the issue. We see a partial association between average education levels among non-EU immigrants and overall employment rates in North-Western Europe, though this pattern seems to fade in Southern and Eastern countries.

The literature review also covers debates and theoretical work regarding other issues, including multi-culturalism, identity formation, policy reactions to immigration and others. Lastly, the literature review covers current trends in actual policymaking in the field of immigration, including efforts to make immigration to Europe more selective and reforms to welfare systems and other integration mechanisms. Whether immigration policies have a stronger or a weaker impact on the actual size and scope of migration flows, they do play a role in enabling or limiting migration – especially migration undertaken via legal routes – compared to a theoretical “natural state” in which no controls are in place. Europe does not have a dominant model of immigration policy at this point, with countries varying from the employment of very restrictive policies (e.g. Denmark) to laissez-faire policies (e.g. Spain). When compared to other European countries, Romania displays a rather laissez-faire model when it comes to ensuring actual access, though it does operate a system of quotas.

Methodology

This thesis uses two main tools, which are complementary and help support a single set of conclusions. The first is a literature and data review, which both feeds into the content of the interview design and offers a framework for the analysis of responses. The thesis draws on literature from multiple studies, books and articles, which often use primary data to map integration patterns among migrant communities. It also uses primary data and policy reports. Based on the preliminary findings of the literature, an interview tool was developed and

administered, leading to the second research component. The complementary qualitative analysis of multiple interviews with non-EU first generation immigrants. These are an original contribution to knowledge on the topic of migrant integration in Romania and are structured based on the prior analysis of the literature. The interviews were kept simple and offered in an English and a Romanian version, face-to-face or via phone or other online video or audio call platforms. A narrative approach was employed in analyzing the interviews and identifying the key avenues for integration.

Interviewees had to meet a series of criteria, including:

- a. First generation migrant, current or recent resident in Romania.
- b. Arrival after roughly age 7 (compulsory schooling started abroad).
- c. Non-EU/EEA/CH nationality at birth and moment of arrival in Romania.
- d. Mother tongue other than Romanian.
- e. Resident in Romania for at least two years.
- f. Non-permanent students (e.g. those in credit or other forms of short-term mobility) were excluded.

20 interviews were selected for the thesis, after interviews with potential inconsistencies were discarded. Special measures were taken to ensure full anonymity for all respondents, and this was communicated to them in advance.

The thesis has multiple limits. There is an implicit bias in the selection of the interviews from a position within the majority citizen body and during the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to a high probability of identifying a large number of people with positive integration experiences. There is also the issue of subjectivity of accounts, with respondents being influenced by past experience, background, personal standards towards the provision of services, etc.

Key findings

As part of the original findings of the thesis, an interesting outcome was the lack of comprehensive „pull,, effects in facilitating immigration to Romania. While motivation for immigrating to

Romania has been diverse across the group of interviewees, the stand-out conclusion was that few respondents had chosen Romania as their destination in a premeditated fashion, with significant planning. The opportunity “appeared” or the solution of moving to Romania “made sense” but it did not seem to have been actively sought by most respondents. Some of the respondents used *ex-post* arguments to justify their choices to come and live or study in Romania, that is arguments built upon their experience after moving. In some cases, the narratives presented by respondents felt like “excuses” rather than deep, meaningful, well-planned reasons for migrating. This indicates that Romania exercises a limited pull effect on what is a largely white collar, often middle class group of immigrants.

When it comes to interaction with the state, general impressions for the visa application process have been relatively poor. This was partially influenced by the high share of students in the interviewee population, as they tended to have the most problematic experiences (due to the tight timing of the visa application process). By contrast, applying for family reunification as described by the three interviewees who arrived via this route seemed a fairly straight-forward affair, in contrast to tightening requirements in other parts of Europe.

In contrast to their attitude towards the state, most respondents were positive with regard to the social networks that they had developed while living in Romania. Responses indicated a broad level of social integration, even for migrants who had arrived more recently. Social networks were important avenues for integration, and often helped increase exposure to Romanian culture, administration, social venues or educational opportunities. For others, socialization seems to have been kept at a more superficial level, and the existence of respondents who were not fluent in Romanian might indicate a preference for more educated or cosmopolitan individuals. Social circles, regardless of their extent or nature, were generally praised by respondents as being important in their lives, fairly easy to form and they offered interviewees a safe, discrimination-free space. Friends seemed important for the exchange of ideas, in organizing one’s free time and even in meeting a romantic partner. Social networks, employment and education seemed to feed into each other, in that many respondents met their friends at university or work and some used information from their social networks to opt for further education or expand their work.

Distinct from social networks, family formation (defined as both marriages and long-term romantic relationships) also showed a high level of integration. Among the interviewees, a distinct

institution of marriage with a *sui generis* nature arose. Not entirely rooted in Romanian nor in migrant traditions, mixed marriages represent a tool of acculturation but also of cultural exchange. Spouses tried to make compromise on issues such as language, childrens' names, religion and traditions and strived to accept their partners and his/her traditions as such, indicating that family formation across larger cultural gaps was possible. These findings should be placed in a context of a sampling tilt towards more highly educated, cosmopolitan individuals and also of a lack of large-scale migrant communities that could facilitate endogamous behaviours.

When it comes to economic integration, findings indicate their limited role as a „pull” factor in attracting international immigrants. Purely economic factors did not seem to play a big role in the decision to move to Romania. Even in the cases in which respondents arrived in Romania for a work opportunity, the interviewees did not highlight income differences or greater access to opportunities as a chief factor in determining them to stay in the country. Nevertheless, most respondents were positive about their work and the relationships that they had established there. While some cases of discrimination and perceived discrimination were reported, in general it can be said that workplace harassment or marginalization was not a significant issue for respondents. Even those who had been critical of certain issues in their relationship with management or co-workers were ultimately capable of overcoming whatever problems they had encountered. That said, two interviewees who considered leaving for a third country did report economic issues as being key determinants in this decision.

Conclusions

When it comes to immigration to Romania, the country was not a first choice destination among most respondents. They did not premeditate moving here, but rather jumped on an occurrence, a circumstance or a cost calculation (sometimes, quite literal). In many cases, the chance to move to Romania was a matter of hearsay, or simply the geographical location of a pre-existing ambition: a volunteering position happened to be in Romania, a career advancement opportunity involved moving to Romania, a potential spouse had roots in the country. In all of these cases, Romania was an incidental location as opposed to constituting the hook for the migratory process itself.

Once migrants decided to move to Romania, however, barriers were limited compared to other European countries. The lack of a unified national immigration management system meant that respondents did not have to go through a complex assessment to migrate to Romania, but merely had to fulfil formalized criteria for their visa type. The respondents did not seem to have the feeling that they used a “stream” pre-arranged by Romanian authorities, with the exception of two persons who arrived via a scholarship/exchange route and one which arrived via an EU-mediated relocation programme for refugees.

Social and economic institutions such as marriage and family, communities of learning and communities of practice, firms and others tended to be given as positive examples or facilitators for integration. For the interviewed population, exogenous social networks were generally the key avenues for integration. Positive appraisal was reserved by most interviewees for their Romanian friends and spouses, who they felt proved supportive and aided in the integration process. In some cases, newly acquired social support networks aided migrants with finding homes, linguistic immersion, finding employment or aided them in completing their studies. In this regard, migrants with limited country-of-origin social networks seemed to have benefitted from an “integration momentum” in which newly acquired social support networks aided further engagement with Romanian society.

The same level of praise was not reserved for political and administrative institutions. These were either criticized or given a mixed appraisal by most respondents. That is, it was felt that these institutions do not adequately respond to migrants needs by most interviewees. One refugee discovered that initial communication with regard to state-offered assistance proved inadequate. Several others were critical of provided language immersion programmes or appreciated their social function over their practical value in language skill acquisition. Furthermore, there was criticism of legal uncertainty, legislation itself and the support offered by public sector employees. Universities and university-related programmes were, in some cases, perceived more positively than initiatives prepared by central level authorities.

The stand-out conclusion was that, when it came to integration avenues employed by highly integrated individuals, informalism tended to have precedence over organized state mechanisms. Expectations were dependent on exogenous factors, including upbringing and previous interactions, but Romanian institutions of all types were far from monolithic, and offered a broad

range of subjective experiences. To a broad degree, these subjective experiences are normal. Informal interactions within institutional settings, and variations in personal behaviours ranging from attitudes to the individual interpretation of norms is common in most cultural settings. The issue is that, within the experiences of the immigrants interviewed for the current thesis, the dominant nature of informal interactions in shaping the integrative experience was overshadowing the role of state institutions to a very broad degree. As migratory processes become massified, the risk of mal integration rises in a state that has abdicated its duties in the integration process itself. Given the above, the thesis provides a series of policy recommendations, which mainly focus on covering the gaps between the instruments and policy tools discussed in the literature and the current functionality of institutions managing migration in Romania.

Notes on complementarity

The present thesis is just part of a long-term personal research project aimed at assessing migrant integration. Research activities conducted for the purpose of this thesis have fed into the preparation of articles or have been used in studies for which I have been a contributing author. Some of the preliminary assumptions, sections and research work associated with the thesis have been presented to an external audience. For example, the literature review and assumptions with regard to intermarriage and family formation were discussed in the PhD Workshop "Migration and Integration", hosted by the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin in July 2018. An article based on the assumptions and research conducted for the section on the institutional dimension of immigration policy were covered in a Springer-published article called *The Role of Demographic Policies in the Internationalization of Romanian Higher Education*, written together with Cezar M. Haj and published in 2020. Other articles and publications written for the duration of my PhD candidacy were not based on the present thesis, but rather on the broader issue of demographic decline and population ageing in Romania.

Interview design

Theme 1 – Relationship with the state	
Q1	What made you choose to come to Romania?
Q2	Please describe the immigration route you arrived in Romania with (family, studies, asylum, economic, other).
Q3	Please describe your interactions with Romanian state institutions in your process of immigrating to Romania. Please cover issues such as visas, information, attitudes.
Prompt	<i>For students ask about visa conversion and institutional support</i>
Prompt	<i>For refugees ask about resettlement, access and NGO support</i>
Prompt	<i>For economic migrants ask about remote application for work and visa</i>
Prompt	<i>For persons with multiple immigration experiences ask for comparisons</i>
Q4	Please describe your interactions with Romanian state institutions in the process of settlement in Romania.
Theme 2 – Marriage and family	
Q1	Do you have a Romanian or a foreign spouse?
Prompt	<i>For Romanian spouse, ask about attitudes, opinions of both domestic and Romanian side of the family.</i>
Prompt	<i>For Romanian spouse, ask if the relationship arose abroad or at home.</i>
Prompt	<i>For Romanian spouse, ask about negotiating religious and cultural habits.</i>
Q2	Do you have children?
Prompt	<i>If yes, ask about negotiating names, religion, education.</i>
Q3	What are the arrangements for language at home?
Prompt	<i>For children, ask about linguistic immersion.</i>
Theme 3 – Broader social	
Q1	Do you have Romanian friends? Are they a big part of your social circle?
Q2	Was it difficult to make friends in Romania?
Q3	Have you ever experienced discrimination due to your origin?
Prompt	<i>For positive answers, ask about context.</i>

Q4	What are some cultural traits that you find common in Romanian society that you struggle to adapt to/accept/understand?
Theme 4 - Economic	
Q1	Do you have a job in Romania? Was it difficult to obtain it?
Prompt	<i>For positive answers ask about narrative.</i>
Prompt	<i>For positive answers ask about discrimination.</i>
Prompt	<i>For positive answer ask about relations with colleagues.</i>
Prompt	<i>For positive answers ask about work ethic.</i>
General: In the spirit of the questions asked, do you have anything else to add relevant to your experience in Romania?	

List of interviews

Code	Country ¹	Age	Used language	Gender
I1	Syria	20s	Mixed	M
I2	Turkey	40s	Romanian	M
I3	India	30s	Romanian	M
I4	Brazil	30s	Romanian	M
I5	Egypt	30s	Romanian	M
I6	Tunisia	20s	Romanian	F
I7	<i>West Africa</i>	30s	English	M
I8	Algeria	20s	English	M
I9	Nigeria	30s	English	M
I10	Israel	30s	English	M
I11	Ukraine	20s	Mixed	F
I12	Vietnam	40s	English	F
I13	Philippines	30s	English	M
I14	Brazil	30s	Romanian	M

¹ Due to the need to maintain statistical secret, interviewees from countries with small populations in Romania are indicated by macro-region of origin. In one case, the region was used at the request of the respondent.

I15	USA	40s	Mixed	M
I16	<i>North and Central America</i>	30s	English	F
I17	Iraq	20s	Romanian	M
I18	<i>East Asia</i>	40s	Mixed	M
I19	<i>Middle East</i>	20s	English	F
I20	Turkey	30s	Romanian	M

Selection of literature

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