

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF POLITICAL STUDIES AND PUBLIC  
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***A sui generis* diaspora. Identity definition across Romanian  
communities in Jordan and Lebanon**

**Doctoral thesis summary**

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## **Introduction**

Nowadays, international migration is a structural phenomenon which shapes economies and demographics, as well as identities, institutions, and power relations. For Romania, migration has proven itself to be one of the most significant post-communist transformations, with profound implications for the relationship between the state and its citizens abroad. Although most research has focused on Romanian communities in Western Europe, little research has been done on the Middle East, and especially the Arab states in the region, even though a particular type of Romanian communities can be found here - Romanian women who have settled in these states as a result of mixed marriages, as well as their descendants.

The presence of Romanian women in the Middle East has a history beginning in the 1970s and intensified in the following decade as a result of bilateral educational collaborations between Romania and the states in the region. During the communist regime, a number of foreign students from Arab countries (the Syrian Arab Republic, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Lebanese Republic, the Republic of Iraq, the Arab Republic of Egypt, etc.) attended courses in Romania, and these contacts led to the formation of the first mixed families. After 1990, freedom of movement and the appearance of business opportunities in Romania allowed new contacts to be established between Arab men and Romanian women and led to the expansion of this type of mobility. Thus, in most cases, the migration of Romanian women was not initiated by job opportunities, but by family ties, which generated geographically dispersed - yet cohesive in terms of identity - communities.

This research focuses on how Romanian women who have settled in Jordan and Lebanon construct their identity and maintain ties with the Romanian state in a cultural, religious, and institutional framework that is fundamentally different from that of their homeland. The cases analyzed do not fall within the scope of traditional economic migration; they take place in family and emotional contexts involving mixed marriages, religious conversions, changes of citizenship, and profound processes of adaptation. In this sense, the paper proposes an analysis situated at the intersection of transnational migration, identity definition in multicultural contexts, and the role of the state in relation its citizens abroad. In addition, established theories on international migration are analyzed and tested in order to assess the extent to which they can explain the trajectories and experiences of the studied communities.

The empirical analysis was conducted on two complementary levels: one focused on the process of identity definition, and the other on identifying the specific features of the diaspora within the two communities. Identity definition is investigated not only as a subjective process, but also as a result of interactions with the cultural, religious, and legal norms specific to host societies, as well as with the often limited forms of institutional support offered by the Romanian state. In this sense, the research aims to highlight the discontinuities of institutional intervention, as well as the ways in which belonging to the homeland is experienced, adapted, and manifested in the absence of a systematic support of the Romanian state.

The selection of Jordan and Lebanon as research areas was based on two factors: the continuity of Romanian communities in these countries and the accessibility of field research. Although the largest Romanian community in the Middle East was initially formed in Syria, it was profoundly and irreparably affected by the civil war that broke out in 2011, which currently hinders in-depth research. In contrast, the communities in Jordan and Lebanon have remained active and visible, and family networks, internal solidarity, and the degree of social visibility allow for in-depth analysis. The Romanian community in Lebanon, although also affected by both historical and recent conflicts, has a high level of social and identity cohesion. In addition, the two societies offer distinct social, religious, and legal frameworks which allow for a comparative exploration of how identity is constructed according to the normative and institutional context. Lebanon is a relevant case study due to its formalized religious pluralism, while Jordan allows us to observe how identity is defined in a predominantly Muslim society with stricter legislation regarding the status of women and foreigners. Both contexts offer important analytical opportunities for understanding the relationship between identity, belonging, and distinct political and cultural regimes.

### ***Hypothesis, objectives, and research questions***

***Research hypothesis:*** The identity definition of Romanian communities in Jordan and Lebanon is the result of the interaction between individual mechanisms of cultural preservation and local adaptation, in the absence of coherent institutional governance on the part of the Romanian state. These processes give rise to an emerging form of diaspora, in which national belonging is affirmed through everyday practices and transnational relationships rather than

through formal political, cultural, or educational infrastructures, highlighting the tension between symbolic recognition and effective support for identity across borders.

**General objective:** To investigate the process of identity definition among Romanian communities in Jordan and Lebanon, analyzing how it is shaped by the interaction between local norms, individual initiatives, and the limited involvement of the Romanian state in a transnational context.

***Specific objectives:***

- To analyze emerging identity configurations within the studied communities, by observing everyday practices and cultural resources mobilized to maintain Romanian belonging;
- To evaluate strategies for the social and religious integration of migrant women, in relation to the norms of host societies and the dynamics of mixed families;
- To investigate the forms of reporting and representation of communities in relation to the Romanian state, focusing on perceptions of institutional presence and the degree of symbolic and practical support;
- To analyze the ways in which the Romanian identity is transmitted in mixed families, with an emphasis on the role of women in cultural reproduction and on the tensions generated by a sense of belonging to multiple cultures as a form of community and identity continuity;
- To evaluate the extent to which these communities can be defined as forms of diaspora, in relation to the theoretical criteria of contemporary diaspora, in the context of the absence of institutional infrastructure and fragmented recognition.

***Research questions:***

- What cultural practices and resources are mobilized to maintain Romanian identity in communities in Jordan and Lebanon?
- How do members of Romanian communities manage the relationship between national belonging and integration into the socio-cultural context of Arab states?
- How do members of Romanian communities perceive their relationship with the Romanian state and what forms of support or representation in the process of identity construction and belonging do they indicate
- How is Romanian identity transmitted in mixed families and to what extent does this process contribute to community continuity?

- To what extent do Romanian communities in Jordan and Lebanon fit into contemporary models of diaspora as a discursive and relational process?

### ***Methodological approach***

This research is based on a qualitative constructivist approach, aimed at understanding how identity is defined and transmitted in Romanian communities formed through mixed marriages in Jordan and Lebanon. Starting from the premise that identity is a relational and contextual process, the research aims to capture not only the individual dimension of Romanian migrants' experiences, but also how they relate to collective and institutional structures.

The main method used was the semi-structured interview, conducted online, with a sample built using the *snowball method*, starting from key contacts in local communities, which tracked the diversity of experiences according to age, period of migration, community involvement, and socio-cultural profile. In order to better contextualize the empirical data, the research also included an analysis of the websites and social media accounts of Romanian embassies in Arab states in the Middle East, with a focus on the two countries analyzed, as well as cultural associations, local legislation affecting identity dynamics, and international reports reflecting the socio-cultural and normative specificities of the two countries. These sources were used to understand the institutional limits of the Romanian presence and to place individual testimonies in a broader normative and geopolitical context.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), combining deductive themes, in line with the research questions (identity, transnationalism, relationship with the state, etc.), with themes emerging from the empirical material (tensions in language transmission, forms of symbolic loyalty, religious hybridity, etc.). The standard ethical framework was respected: informed consent, protection of anonymity, and a reflexive approach to the researcher's positioning. The positioning involves a dual perspective: cultural proximity to the participants, through sharing a common identity (language, national origin), but also a distance resulting from the fact that the researcher does not directly share the migratory conditions and status of the participants.

The choice of this qualitative methodological approach responds to the need to capture the complexity of identity processes in communities formed through mixed marriages, in cultural and institutional contexts significantly different from the Romanian one. The research highlights how

national belonging is experienced and adapted in the absence of a formal infrastructure, at the intersection of family, community space, and relation with the state of origin.

### *Structure of the paper*

Following the introductory section, Chapter II provides an essential contextual framework for understanding the particularities of the research environment. It analyzes the profile and vulnerabilities of Romanian communities in Arab states in the Middle East, especially those resulting from marital migration during the communist and post-communist periods. The chapter is predominantly analytical and cautionary in nature, highlighting the risks of cultural assimilation and loss of identity in the absence of coherent institutional interventions. At the same time, it substantiates the choice of the two case studies and argues their relevance for understanding identity dynamics in distinct religious and geopolitical contexts.

Chapter III details the theoretical framework of the research. Three main dimensions are analyzed: theories of international migration, diaspora, and identity construction in a transnational context. A transition is made from classical migration theories to recent approaches, with an emphasis on transnationalism, migration through marriage, and alternative forms of belonging. The chapter proposes a constructivist reading of identity and diaspora as a relational and symbolic space in which belonging is defined through everyday practices, discourses, and multiple positions. The concepts of transnational identity, hybridity, and situational and discursive identity are analyzed. Finally, this framework allows for the interpretation of communities in Jordan and Lebanon as emerging forms of diaspora, in which affiliation is not institutionally guaranteed, but is constructed in relation to the family, the host space, and the Romanian state.

Chapter IV is dedicated to the methodological framework. It describes the qualitative constructivist approach to research and details the semi-structured interview method used in the analysis of the two communities, with reference to how the sample was constructed and the analysis techniques. Complementary sources investigated are also mentioned. The chapter concludes by addressing ethical issues and the researcher's reflexive positioning.

Chapter V analyzes the social, political, religious, and legal context in Lebanon and Jordan in order to understand the conditions that shape the life and identity of the Romanian communities in the two states. The chapter has a dual function: on the one hand, it describes the normative and institutional framework that influences the formation and functioning of these communities, and,

on the other hand, it examines the bilateral relations between Romania and the two states, highlighting the role of Romanian diplomacy in providing symbolic or practical support to communities in the Middle East and in opening initial channels of contact that favored migration through marriage.

Chapter VI provides a contextualization of Romanian migration to the Middle East and discusses the applicability of established migration theories to these communities. It addresses the differences between economic and matrimonial migration, gender and religion-related particularities, as well as the relationships between symbolic mobility and loyalty to the state. The chapter highlights the extent to which economic and functionalist explanations are insufficient to understand these forms of affective and institutionally ambiguous mobility. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the two communities: their social composition, modes of informal organization, religious diversity, relationship to Romania, and degree of internal cohesion. These descriptions provide a solid basis for the analysis of identity and specific features of the diaspora in the following chapters, contextualizing collective practices and representations in the socio-political realities of the two spaces.

Chapter VII is dedicated to analyzing the process of identity definition in Romanian communities in Jordan and Lebanon, based on a constructivist theoretical framework. Identity is approached as a relational, dynamic, and contextual process, situated between Romanian cultural values and the norms of the host society. The cultural-symbolic dimensions of belonging (language, rituals, symbols, domestic practices), strategies for identity visibility in the public sphere, and the intergenerational transmission of identity in mixed families are analyzed. The chapter highlights the role of women as key actors in cultural and identity reproduction, emphasizing the influence of gender on access to visibility and resources. Institutional aspects are also addressed—the relationship with embassies, the activity of cultural associations, and the symbolic representation of the Romanian state—which shape the sense of belonging and legitimacy. The transnational dimension is explored through the lens of digital networks and constant interactions with Romania, but also through the hybrid form of identity, situated between integration and difference.

Chapter VIII proposes an analysis of Romanian communities in Jordan and Lebanon through the lens of the concept of diaspora, applying an analytical framework inspired by the theories formulated by Safran, Cohen, Brubaker, and Sökefeld. Based on these contributions, an

analytical framework is constructed, aimed at identifying the extent to which these communities exhibit characteristics and behaviors specific to the diaspora, without resorting to essentialist assumptions. The second part of the chapter applies this framework to the two communities, investigating dimensions such as symbolic orientation towards the homeland, the maintenance of identity boundaries, collective consciousness, and the relationship with the Romanian state. Forms of informal solidarity, support networks, the symbolic presence of Romania, and the cultural resources mobilized to preserve identity are analyzed.

### **Conclusions, proposals, and limitations of the research**

This research aimed to investigate a relatively marginalized dimension in the literature on Romanian migration: communities of Romanian women settled in the Middle East, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon, as a result of transnational marriages. These forms of mobility, often excluded from narratives of economic migration or institutionally organised diaspora, bring to the fore a deeply contextualised migration experience, lived at the intersection of affect, religion, gender and divergent cultural norms, and an inconsistent institutional presence. The paper started from the hypothesis that the identity definition of these women is the result of a relational process, constantly adapted between belonging to Romania, integration into host societies, and limited or symbolic interaction with the Romanian state.

Empirical research data has shown that dominant economic theories—such as the push-pull model, neoclassical theory, or the new economic theory of migration—provide an insufficient explanatory framework for understanding the migration of Romanian women to Arab states in the Middle East. These models, built around economic rationality and the maximisation of individual or family capital, do not capture the emotional motivations, gender context and legal-religious complexity in which this form of mobility takes place. Unlike traditional economic migration, where the decision to leave is often linked to aspirations for improved social status and financial gain, in the case of migration through marriage, migratory trajectories are linked to emotional choices and cultural norms that cannot be reduced to rational calculation. This form of migration requires a distinct analytical space that integrates gender and religious normative structures, power dynamics within mixed families, and the mechanisms through which belonging to the country of origin is expressed.



This paper proposes treating migration through marriage as a distinct theoretical field, requiring its own analytical framework, situated at the intersection of migration, transnationalism, and gender studies. In particular, the migration of Romanian women to Arab states in the Middle East cannot be analyzed solely through the lens of personal mobility, but must be understood as a negotiation between belonging and cultural norms in which women become essential actors in the construction of identity and the perpetuation of ties with their country of origin.

One contribution of this research is to reaffirm the relevance of the constructivist paradigm in the analysis of identity processes in atypical migratory contexts. Unlike essentialist approaches, which treat national identity as an inherited, stable trait automatically transmitted through origin, this research confirms that identity is a social, relational, and deeply contextual process. Belonging is continuously produced through interactions, through positioning in relation to social, religious, and political norms, and through emotional and symbolic references to the space of origin. In this sense, the research validates a vision of identity as a lived reality, constructed through language, daily customs, domestic rituals, the transmission of the mother tongue, and the organization of family life. For Romanian women in Jordan and Lebanon, identity is a constant effort to maintain, adapt, and reaffirm a sense of belonging that is in tension with the cultural and legal norms of the host society. This approach was essential for interpreting the collected data and provides a solid analytical basis for understanding communities as informal and non-institutionalized diasporas.

Another theoretical contribution of the paper is the proposal to conceptualize these communities as emerging forms of diaspora. This approach, inspired by the works of Brubaker, Cohen, and Sökefeld, presupposes a flexible understanding of diaspora as a symbolic and affective space in which the relationship with the homeland is articulated. From a classical perspective, the communities analyzed do not fit into the theoretical patterns of diaspora because they are not the result of traumatic exile, do not form a massive economic diaspora, do not channel their energy toward return, and are not supported by a robust institutional framework. The Romanian women in these communities emigrated mainly through marriage, not as a result of political exile, forced economic migration, or conflict, so their emigration is voluntary and emotional, not collective or traumatic. Although they show strong attachment to Romania, returning to their country of origin is presented more as a backup plan or conditional on their children's decisions, rather than a collective direction. This contradicts the central principle of classical theories, in which return, even if only imaginary, is central to narrative cohesion. In addition, the absence of well-defined

formal networks, Romanian schools and churches, or political mobilization structures means that these communities do not meet the historical and structural criteria that define a diaspora in the conventional sense. In the constructivist approach (Brubaker, 2005; Sökefeld, 2006), however, the diaspora is not seen as a stable and institutionalized entity, but as a continuous process of identity manifestation. It is actively produced through discourse, practices, and relationships. From this perspective, the Romanian communities in Jordan and Lebanon appear as emerging forms of diaspora that build a sense of belonging in the absence of a formal infrastructure.

Another theoretical result of the research is the questioning of the role of the Romanian state in relation to the communities in the Arab states of the Middle East. Although Romania constantly affirms its commitment to the diaspora in public discourse, the reality experienced in these communities shows a reduced and fragmented presence. The state appears rather in festive moments, through official messages or occasional visits, without building sustainable, systematic support adapted to the specificities of these communities. This discontinuity between discourse and intervention suggests the existence of a model of symbolic governance, in which recognition of identity is not accompanied by resources, infrastructure, or coherent policies. Thus, belonging is delegated to individuals, and the state retains only its role as a moral guarantor, without assuming concrete responsibilities in supporting Romanians abroad. Through this analysis, the research contributes to the debate on the limits of state involvement in the non-institutionalised diaspora, questioning the tension between the national discourse on the diaspora and the actual mechanisms of inclusion and support, especially in the case of forms of migration that do not benefit from institutional and political visibility.

Empirical analysis of Romanian communities established in Jordan and Lebanon reveals a series of specific features that confirm the hypothesis formulated in the introduction to the research. Data obtained through semi-structured interviews show that Romanian identity is expressed predominantly in everyday, family, and emotional contexts, rather than through formal or institutional mechanisms. The most common ways of maintaining identity include the constant use of the Romanian language in the family environment, the celebration of traditional Romanian holidays, the education of children in the spirit of values considered Romanian, and the maintenance of a continuous link with Romania through visits, long-distance communication, and media and cultural consumption. Although these practices are not supported by Romanian cultural or educational institutions in the host countries, they generate a persistent form of national

belonging that transcends physical distance and the community's lack of visibility in the local public sphere. This type of belonging is strongly internalized and activated on a daily basis, becoming an integral part of family life and personal identity. Romanian identity is therefore not just a symbolic heritage, it is a dimension that is actively lived and reproduced.

A central aspect identified in the empirical analysis is that integration into the host societies, Jordan and Lebanon, does not imply abandoning one's identity of origin, but, on the contrary, stimulates constant adaptation between two normative and cultural systems. The women interviewed describe a dynamic relationship with their own identity, in which elements of Romanian culture are preserved, reinterpreted, or combined with local elements to facilitate integration while maintaining a sense of belonging to Romania. This selection of identity is conscious and active: values considered essential—such as language, traditions, family values—are maintained, while other practices are adapted or abandoned. The result is a hybrid identity, in which belonging to Romania is not negated by the migratory context, but becomes part of a more complex equation of multiple loyalties. Religious differences, especially in cases where women have converted to Islam, accentuate this adaptation, with the change of religion being perceived as an adaptation to the family and societal context rather than a break with Romania. In these cases, national identity is re-signified, not abandoned.

One of the most important findings of the research is the confirmation of the central role of women in maintaining and transmitting national identity in these communities. In the absence of Romanian educational or cultural institutions in the Middle East, mothers become true centers of transgenerational identity continuity. They are the ones who speak Romanian to their children, who pass on stories, customs, and norms of behavior associated with the values of Romanian society. Moreover, in some cases, women become hubs of informal networks in the diaspora: they mediate relationships between families, pass on useful information about children's education, legal formalities, consular contacts, and online resources. This position transforms them into central cultural and social actors, although invisible in relation to state institutions. These communities do not have classic diaspora structures: there are no registered Romanian schools, Romanian Orthodox parishes, or Romanian cultural centers, and the associative environment is undersized, with only one Romanian association in each of the two states. Nevertheless, the sense of belonging and Romanian identity are experienced, expressed, and transmitted intergenerationally mainly through informal social networks, family, and domestic rituals.

National identity is activated through symbolic gestures (stories about Romania, watching Romanian TV programs, celebrating traditional holidays), but also through the choice of the mother tongue in communicating with children.

Therefore, this diaspora is not institutionalized, but is born and reproduced within informal support and communication networks; it is an emerging form because it does not meet all the classic criteria of an organized diaspora (institutional coherence, public visibility, collective representation), but it already manifests forms of solidarity, symbolic reproduction, and transnational orientation characteristic of the diaspora. Moreover, the form of diaspora that has taken shape in these communities is feminized and domestic, with women acting as bearers of identity and the main agents of cultural continuity. There is no formal elite speaking on behalf of the community, but there are centers of emotional gravity: women who, through networks and personal initiative, become cultural landmarks for others.

This observation confirms the usefulness of the concept of diaspora in the sense proposed by Brubaker and Sökefeld, as the communities analyzed can be understood as emerging forms of an informal, affective, and relational diaspora, in which cohesion does not derive from collective organization or institutional intervention, but from interpersonal relationships, memory, and life practices. This type of diaspora is often invisible in relation to public policies or official statistics, but it has the potential for cultural continuity.

Although this research contributes to the understanding of emerging forms of diaspora and the identity dynamics of Romanian women settled in Arab states in the Middle East, it has a number of methodological, empirical, and conceptual limitations that need to be explicitly discussed in order to clarify the scope of applicability of the results. A first limiting factor concerns the exclusive focus on the first generation of migrants, i.e., women who left Romania and settled in Jordan and Lebanon following marriage. This choice was made for methodological reasons, as the main objective of the research was to understand the processes that shape identity in these contexts, the relationships with the place of origin and the host country, as well as the ways in which a sense of belonging is constructed in the absence of a consistent institutional infrastructure.

A second essential aspect concerns the difficulty of including Romanian women who are fully assimilated into the local culture in the sample. They no longer maintain links with the informal networks of the community and cannot be accessed through the "snowball" method used in this study. Their absence from the research is not without significance: epistemological

exclusion, in which full assimilation becomes invisible both socially and analytically. Certain situations suggesting this identity rupture were reported by the interview participants, but as they were interpreted through personal, emotional, or evaluative filters, they were not included in the systematic analysis, but rather only mentioned as indications of the existence of a category that is difficult to access directly.

It should also be noted that this research was conducted in an unstable geopolitical context, particularly in Lebanon, where political, economic, and social crises affected participant availability, the possibility of conducting face-to-face interviews, and the consistency of the fieldwork process. Uncertainty imposed logistical and ethical limitations on the conduct of the research, and some contacts were lost or interrupted before the discussions were completed. In addition, the research targeted a relatively small diaspora community without a clear institutional map, which made it impossible to construct a statistically representative sample. The choice of a qualitative approach was appropriate for this type of context, but it also implies a limitation in terms of generalisation. The data do not support the formulation of universal patterns; rather, they offer a contextualised and interpretative understanding of how identity is constructed in small, informal communities. At the same time, the applicability of the results must be understood in relation to the normative, cultural, and religious specificities of the host societies and communities analyzed, which requires a careful interpretation of identity practices and how they are articulated and transmitted outside institutional frameworks.

This research does not conclude an analysis, it opens up a whole new field. It invites us to rethink the way we understand diaspora, identity, and loyalty across borders, at a time when global mobility and cultural pluralism are transforming the classic foundations of belonging. The small, little-visible but resilient communities in the Middle East are part of this process and need to be listened to, understood, and brought back into the horizon of Romanian political and institutional reflection.