Migration and Development in Romania: An Aspirations-Capabilities Approach to Romanian Migration

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Abstract

Despite significant development since the fall of the communist regime in 1989, migration rates from Romania to the West remain consistently high. This paper adopts an aspirations-capabilities approach to analyse how development leads to changing ideas of a good life among three Romanian migrant groups – practically educated, higher educated, and students. It argues that transformations in five social dimensions – political, economic, demographic, technological, and cultural – alter ideas of a 'good life' in Romania. The findings indicate three distinct understandings of a good life which are better pursued abroad. Practically educated migrants aspire to pursue more financially stable lives abroad. Higher-educated migrants leave Romania in search of more flexible employment opportunities where they can develop professionally and contribute to the wellbeing of their communities. Lastly, students migrate both due to better educational opportunities abroad and also as a result of an inherent desire to explore the world. Ultimately, the study realises an image of migration as an integral part of larger social transformation processes.

Keywords

Migration, Social transformation, Aspirations and Capabilities, Romania

Positionality

This research has been shaped from its incipient stages by the process of *active reflexivity* (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020) involving the constant inquiry regarding my own positionality, social location, and set of assumptions. My initial presupposition was that being Romanian would be the most relevant aspect of my identity in this research. In a way, I presumed that the intimate knowledge I had of the Romanian culture, granted by my upbringing, would create an immediate link between me and the participants. To a certain extent, this proved correct. Often, the participants took for granted that I would understand certain nuances of the lived experience of Romanians in the origin context. To this end, the familiar environment to discuss the topic allowed for more nuanced elaborations of their migration rationales. Consequently, at the level of analysis, I was able to include certain subtleties that emerged through the text, which otherwise could not have been interpreted as such. However, other aspects of my identity, such as age and social status, weighed heavier. During the interviews with the lower-educated and higher-educated groups, it proved difficult to create a working relationship due to my age and limited life experience. It was often assumed that I would not fully comprehend the challenges faced by migrants. This often made the

participants reticent to share the full extent of their experience, which proved to be a difficult step to overcome during the research. This brought further important questions regarding the ontological ideas we have about 'natural communities' based on common citizenship.

Introduction

In 2018, the Romanian diaspora was the largest in Europe and the fifth-largest among OECD countries (FES, 2019; OECD, 2019). Due to the consistently high emigration rates to Western Europe since the 1989 anti-communist revolution, emigration has become a highly politicised social and cultural phenomenon in Romania (FES 2019; Pripoaie, 2022). On repeated terms, Romanian politicians blamed migrants for "abandoning" their country and called the diaspora a "parallel electorate" (Gazeta Românească Italia, 2022; R., 2022; Basiul, 2020). Similarly, the academic debate surrounding the migration phenomenon in Romania remains largely functionalist and economic-centred. Whilst some argue that migration hinders economic development in Romania through "brain drain' (Gavriloaia, 2020; Goga, 2020), others hold that the Romanian diaspora is, in fact, an important vector of economic, political, and social development in Romania (Horvath & Anghel, 2009; Filip & Branașco, 2022). However, such binary arguments hold the erroneous presupposition that development will reduce migration and advance politicised migration narratives.

My study examines Romania's case and explores the social transformations behind the consistent migration drive to Western Europe, despite increased national development. To this end, the question guiding this research is: *how have social transformation processes in Romania altered migrants' subjective understandings of a 'good life'?* An aspirations-capabilities framework is adopted to illustrate how development produces a gap between individual life aspirations and opportunities in Romania. I argue that macro transformation processes in the political, cultural, economic, technological and demographic social dimensions alter ideas of a 'good life'. Consequently, life aspirations no longer match the reality in origin, which drives people to pursue better lives abroad. Eventually, this approach is instrumental in proposing an alternative narrative of migration as a symbol of development and an integral part of larger processes of social transformation.

Henceforth, this paper is structured as follows; first, the theoretical section discusses the main perspectives in the migration-development debate, introduces Zelinsky's (1971) mobility transition theory, and de Haas' (2021) aspirations-capabilities framework. Second, the case study of Romania is discussed in two parts. Part one provides a broad overview of social transformation in Romania. Part two analyses Romanian migration trends and patterns since 1990. Then, the research methods and approaches are discussed in the methodology section. Furthermore, the findings of each research group are assessed individually. Lastly, the final part discusses the limitations and conclusions of the paper.

The Debate on Migration and Development

The development–migration debate has long been contested (Schiller & Faist, 2009). Broadly, two general competing perspectives have dominated the discussion so far (Taylor, 1999). On the one hand, "pessimists" claim that migration "drains" sending areas of essential human and economic capital, hence hindering economic development in origin states (Gamlen, 2014; Lipton, 1980; Carrington & Detragiache, 1998). On the other hand, "optimists"

argue that migration contributes to the development of both origin and destination countries. Specifically, the flow of migrants' experiences, knowledge and capital support development in destination states (Gamlen, 2014).

However, contemporary literature often condemns the simplistic assumptions underlying the two perspectives (Castles, 2009). De Haas (2010a) draws attention to the presumed functionalist linearity contained in this debate – that migration is a consequence of underdevelopment. Furthermore, the academic insistence on the economic impact in origin regions fails to account for the influence of more extensive social transformation processes in migration decision-making (Schewel, 2019, p. 29). To this end, it is crucial to consider both agency and structural impediments when analysing human mobility (de Haas, 2021).

The Mobility Transition Theory

Migration has long been discussed as a result of various development processes and structural forces but only scarcely studied as an integral part of larger societal changes. Wilbur Zelinsky (1971) is one of the first scholars to elaborate on the non-linearity of migration processes and how development leads to changing migration patterns. He conceptualises in his model five stages of development – (1) premodern; (2) early transitional, (3) late transitional, (4) advanced; and (5) supra-advanced societies – each coinciding with different levels of mobility (pp. 230-231). As a society develops through the stages, it is accompanied by increasingly higher levels of migration (p. 233). It is only when a society has gone through a prolonged period of transformation and growth that emigration finally starts to decrease and immigration increases (p. 233). Despite its universal, deterministic assumptions, the relevance of the theory stems from its early analysis of migration as part of broader processes of development and social change and not just as an isolated event (Piche, 2013, p. 144). Through the transition hypothesis, Zelinsky effectively contests the presupposition that development leads to less migration. Conversely, the model shows us that migration "shifts systematically with development", and the connection between the two is not linear (Skeldon, 2019, p. 395).

The Aspiration-Capabilities Model

Zelinsky's transition theory paved the way for a new body of literature conceptualising migration as an intrinsic part of broader social transformation processes. In line with this, de Haas' (2021) aspirations-capabilities approach is an illustrative example of the new approach in migration and development studies. De Haas (2021) argues that development leads to the expansion of migrants' aspirations and capabilities to pursue better life opportunities. Building on Sen's (1999) understanding of development as freedom, the aspiration-capabilities framework conceptualizes migration not only as instrumental but also as a "potentially wellbeing-enhancing factor in its own right" (de Haas, 2021, p. 20). As such, migration can serve both instrumental and intrinsic purposes (p. 15). Instrumentally, it can provide individuals with access to better opportunities, while intrinsically, it can enhance well-being by offering the chance to explore new environments, going beyond just its practical value.

When referring to capabilities, Sen essentially means "people's ability to enhance the substantive choices they have" (p. 24). Consequently, de Haas conceptualizes aspirations as "a function of people's life aspirations" and capabilities. Specifically, although living conditions in society improve, people's life aspirations might develop faster, which results in consistent migratory aspirations (de Haas, 2021, p. 17). However, people's migration

aspirations are more or less constrained by personal capabilities and structural to do so. As such, the model aims to include the notions of agency and structure in a common framework (de Haas, 2021). Agency refers to "the limited – but real – ability of human beings (or social groups) to make independent choices and to impose these on the world and, hence, to alter the structures that shape and constrain people's opportunities or freedoms" (p. 14). Structure represents the "patterns of social relations, beliefs and behaviour" (p. 14). Consequently, the two concepts link back to the notions of aspirations and capabilities, respectively. Whilst people can have the aspirations to migrate, their agency – and thus capabilities – can be more or less restricted by structural factors.

Case Study: A Brief Social History of Romania

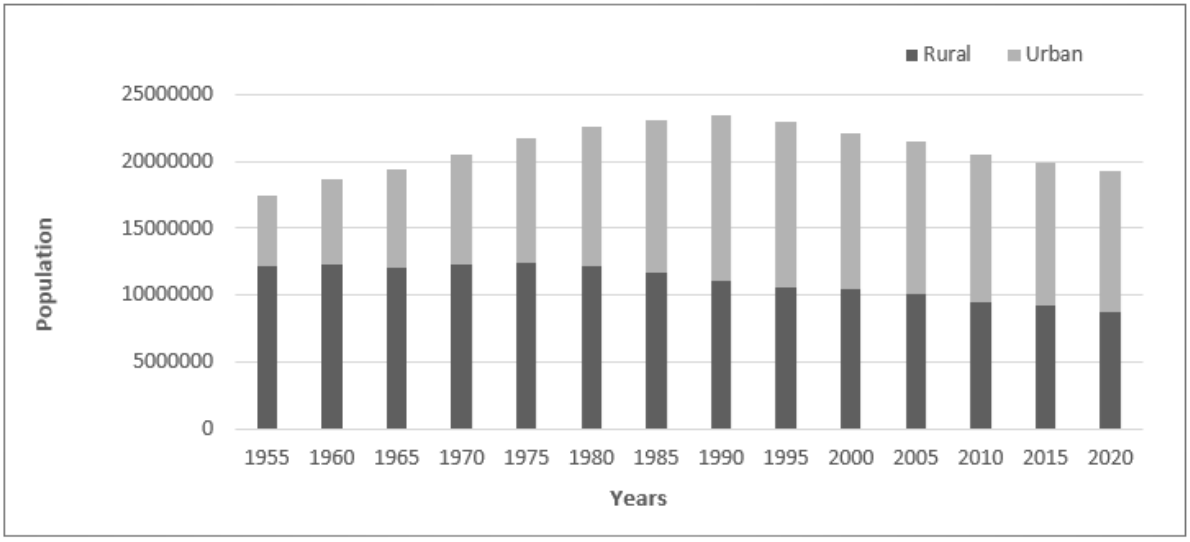
In an attempt to step away from notions such as 'modernization' due to the deterministic and Eurocentric underlying meanings retained by this terminology (Omar, 2022), this paper adopts the terminology 'social transformation' as an alternative to development. De Haas et al. (2020) define the term as macro-level "societal shifts on a deep structural level" of all social patterns (p. 15-16). Consequently, they theorize a model of measuring social transformations in a society composed of five interlinked dimensions – the political, the demographic, the cultural, the technological and the economic (p. 18). Together, these five elements constitute 'the social realm', and by assessing them together, one can account for the larger processes of social transformation in society. This section uses secondary sources to analyse long-term transformations in Romania according to the five dimensions presented by de Haas et al. (2020) – demographic, political, economic, cultural, and technological. In line with this, I provide an overview of Romania's latest migration trends and patterns and how these were influenced by macro social changes in the five dimensions.

Changes in Romania's Five Social Dimensions

The communist period in Romania between the 1950s and 1989 represented a period of high urban development. During the 1950s, the communist party sparked a forced process of rural-urban migration through extensive deportations and agrarian dispossessions (Mioc, 2017). The process was further structurally endorsed by technological and economic changes, which led to the creation of large industrial urban spaces and increased regional interconnectivity across Romania (Giurescu, n.d.). Consequently, by 1990, the rural population had decreased by half and reached 47% of the total population (see Figure 1). Importantly, this transformation provided the ground for the post-1989 international migration.

Figure 1

Rural vs urban population – Romania 1955-2020



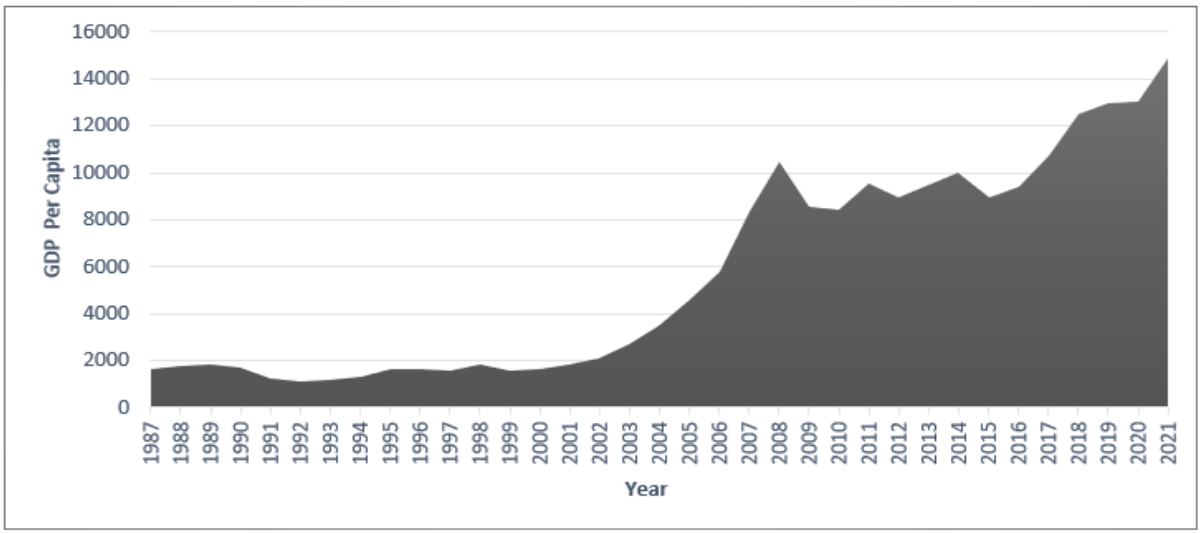
Note: Figure illustrating the development of population numbers living in rural vs urban areas in Romania between 1955 and 2020. Based on figures from the Worlds Meters Open Database.

After the 1989 anti-communist revolution, although there was a hope that the situation in Romania would improve, the democratic transition remained fragmented (Pridham, 2007). Struggling with the legacy of communist politics and a weak civil society, Romania repeatedly failed to address some critical deep-rooted political challenges (Mihas, 1997). Presently, Romania still struggles with systemic corruption (Hein, 2015) and a lack of transparency at the governmental level (Androniceanu, 2021). On a social level, an inability on the side of politicians to manage corruption issues generated a sense of political mistrust, which often represents a driver of out migration (Kolczynska et al., 2020; Berriane et al., 2021, pp. 20-21).

Furthermore, migration patterns were also shaped by Romania's economic development, which, in turn, was highly influenced by urbanisation and European integration processes. Increased connectivity with the more economically developed EU labour market provided cultural exchanges and structural encouragement for consistent emigration rates from Romania. As illustrated in Figure 2, the country's GDP per capita has followed a path of consistent growth since 1990. Moreover, preceding urbanisation processes led to the diversification of the Romanian labour market (see Figure 3). From a highly industrial economy, the Romanian labour market developed into a service-oriented economy.

Figure 2

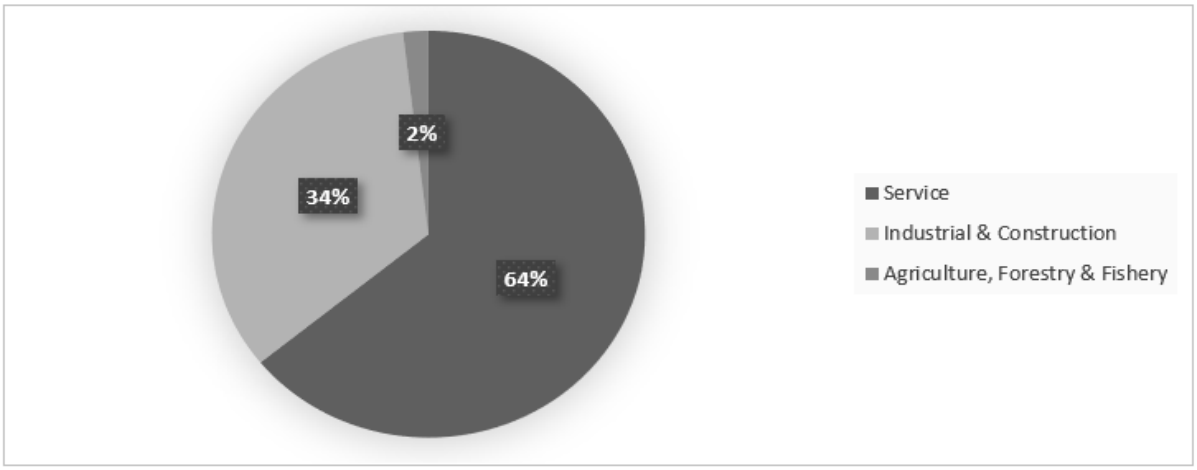
GDP (current) per capita measured in US Dollars – Romania 1998 – 2022



Note: Figure illustrating the GDP (current) Per Capita development in Romania since 1987. Based on figures from the World Bank Open Database.

Figure 3

Labour market sector distribution – Romania 2021

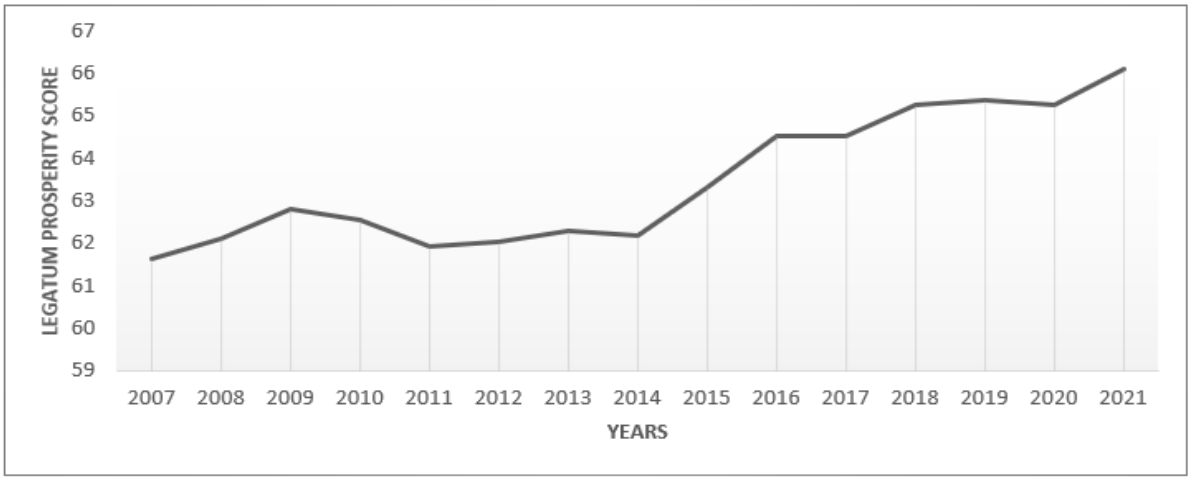


Note: Figure illustrating the dominant sectors in Romania's labour market. Based on figures from the European Commission Open Database.

Furthermore, economic growth was accompanied by transformations in the country's welfare regime. This is especially visible in the rise of its Legatum Prosperity score (LPI) (see Figure 4) and Human Development Index (HDI) score, which significantly increased from 0.689 in 1990 to 0.832 in 2019 (United Nations, n.d.). Other studies on the development of Romanian welfare, looking at health, income, education, and consumption since 1990, also show improvement in all four elements (Toader et al., 2016). Despite significant comparative drawbacks at a healthcare and educational, technological advancement level, Toader et al. (2016) showed the beginning of a convergence tendency with Western European welfares, which is expected to continue in the following years.

Figure 4

Legatum Prosperity Index – Romania 2011 – 2021



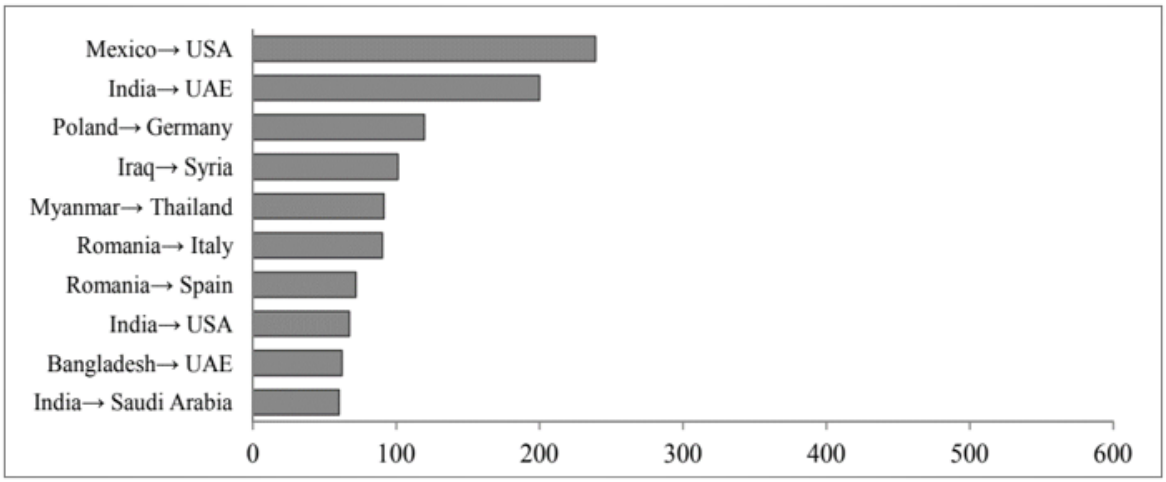
Note: Figure illustrating the development of the LPI score in Romania since 2007. Based on figures from the Legatum Prosperity Index Open Dataset.

Migration Trends Development

Changes in the five dimensions of social transformation radically altered Romanian migration trends and profiles. Broadly, Romanian migration to Western Europe took place in three waves. The initial wave of migration during the 1990s was dominated by lower-educated workers and Romanian citizens with a German ethnic background (Încalţărău, 2012, p. 730; Sandu, 2010, p. 39). From 1990 to 2002, despite mobility restrictions, Romania continued to experience high levels of lower-educated irregular migration to Western European countries – especially Italy and Spain, but also France, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands (Sandu et al., 2006, p. 387). Furthermore, the magnitudes of the Romanian emigration phenomenon can further be seen in Figure 5, illustrating that during the 2000-2010 period, the Romania-Italy and Romania-Spain migration corridors were among the top 10 bilateral corridors globally.

Figure 5

Ten bilateral migration corridors with the largest average annual change in the number of international migrants, 2000-2010, measured in thousand



Note: Based on figures from United Nations International Migration Report 2015.

By 2008, a new group of higher-educated migrants had grown to dominate migration patterns to Western Europe. The beginning of the 2000s already saw increasingly higher rates of highly educated Romanian emigrants to the West and by 2015, 46.6% of Romanian emigrants were highly educated (Sandu et al., 2004; Sandu, 2005; Stan & Erne, 2013, p. 30; OECD, 2019). As of 2002, once Schengen visas were no longer required for Romanians to emigrate to the EU, the first high wave of Romanian regular migration took place and increasingly more young people began migrating (Încalţărău, 2012). Hence, a third important group of student migrants emerged after 2002. During the past few years, Romanian students have become some of the most numerous international students in countries such as Italy, France, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain (Education Fair, 2020; Schengen Visa News, 2022). However, as Horváth and Anghel (2009, p. 389) point out, the particular features and dynamics of various forms of Romanian migration since 2007 have yet to be thoroughly analysed.

Methodology

The study uses 16 in-depth interviews to explain the consistently high emigration rates to Western Europe despite increased development. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed using Taylor's (2018) phronetic iterative coding methodology, which entails the consistent shifting between existing literature and new emerging data. The method was chosen because it provides a good analytical balance between investigating initial research interests and creating space for new findings to advance previous theoretical understandings (Tracy, 2018).

Qualitative research produces insightful data with low participant numbers, which I selected using non-probability purposive sampling to strategically identify individuals relevant to the study (Hossain, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Since significantly less is known about migratory drivers between 2007 and now, my research collected data from people who emigrated during this timeframe. Additionally, representativeness was ensured to a certain extent by selecting participants from one of the three most representative Romanian migrant groups today –

lower/practically educated workers (LE), highly educated workers (HE), and students (S). The participant selection was made only among migrants from the primary Western European destinations using a combination between snowball and convenience sampling from various diasporic groups. All interviewees migrated between the ages of 18 and 45 to account for the primary age group of Romanian migrants (Iftimoaei & Baciu, 2018; OECD, 2019). Eventually, 16 participants were chosen for the study, of which eight were men and eight were women, to reflect the gender ratio among migrants today (OECD, 2019).

Thinking Beyond Tomorrow – Changing Social Aspirations Among Practically Educated Workers

"Our understanding in that time [*under the communist rule*] was that yes, you manage to reach Occidental Europe, you struggle, but you FIND a place to work", discusses a practically educated participant when asked about his decision to migrate to Spain. He explains that upon the fall of the communist regime, people finally had access to the long-desired Western European lifestyle. Soon after, practically educated workers learned that life abroad is a life of security, where part of their financial problems could be solved.

To this end, it is essential to understand the decision to migrate in a framework of constraints and opportunities. The economic reality of practically skilled workers in Romania often remains hard. Participants discussed difficulties in making ends meet, providing for their families, and supporting their children's education. Despite the national economic growth, lower-educated workers in Romania find it hard to get a job which allows them to gain a sense of financial security: "when I got my paycheck, I'd draw the line, and I'd still be in debt".

Conversely, increased access to Western European lifestyles expanded the social imaginary of lower-educated workers. "The West" came to represent a land of prosperity, where everyone could enjoy a prosperous existence. Important to note here is also the realization among interviewees that newly formed ideas about a good life could not be pursued in Romania:

> In the West I realized that the normal man - and when I say normal, normal means the ordinary worker - if he's moderate, if he's ok, if he's like that, he can afford one weekend outing, one holiday a year, change his car once every two years, I don't know what... So the normal man. You didn't have that in Romania.

Although financial motives remain central to the decision of practically skilled workers to migrate, the complexity of the lower-educated Romanian emigration phenomenon goes beyond the economic sphere. Migration has a transformative impact on the personal life of low-educated Romanian migrants. Specifically, here I refer to the psychological dimension of self-worth. The work culture in Romania appears to regard practically skilled jobs as 'inferior'. Conversely, when moving abroad, the participants reported feeling valued and appreciated for their work:

> [*Before*] I didn't think I could be someone who others say is capable and say it out loud. It's a really nice feeling to hear from someone only words of appreciation.

Consequently, this positively affected their overall quality of life and self-worth, as migration expands the psychological capacities of people to visualize themselves as important societal assets. To this end, the well-being enhancing the character of migration can be observed:

> Aspirations come as you begin to know yourself, your self-confidence is at an all-time high, and then you allow yourself, no matter how much money you have in your pocket, to have some aspirations.

Giving Back to the Community – Aspirations Which Shape the Social Environment Among Highly Educated Migrants

"It's not about money. I was making enough money in Romania too", explains one of the highly educated participants from France. Unlike practically educated workers, the mobility of highly educated migrants is not so much explained by the pursuit of better financial situations as it is linked to their experiences in the professional sphere and disappointment with the political class. Monetary gains are no longer sufficient for a 'good life'. To this end, unravelling the subjective meanings allocated to the notion of a 'good life' among highly educated migrants is critical in understanding why people choose to migrate despite having a good financial situation at home.

Educational opportunity expansion in the past few decades in Romania created a class of highly educated workers, which impacted their life aspirations (Schewel, 2019, p. 201). Highly educated workers are now looking for opportunities to develop professionally and to produce creative and highly qualitative work. However, the qualifications of academically educated migrants are frequently higher than the labour market requires, which often leads to a plateau in their professional development. Furthermore, this explains the consistency of mobility aspirations among highly educated people, despite experiencing high living standards in origin:

> Months before I moved I was already feeling that professionally I was no longer evolving in the direction that interested me. Job offers in the direction that interested me were not attractive in Romania.

Lastly, a central reason for migrating among highly educated migrants is dissatisfaction with the political class. The 2007 EU accession generated hope among highly-educated Romanians migrants – which might also explain the relative stabilization of emigration rates during that time. However, subsequent chronic political disappointment and daily experiences with systemic corruption altered the ability of highly educated workers to project their life in Romania, which represented a critical structural incentive to leave.

Living in a Migration Culture – Student Migration from Romania

Growing up in a culture of migration, the young generation learned from an early age that a good life is better pursued abroad. Young people appear highly receptive to deterring narratives from older generations which incentivize their decision to leave. As one informant explains, the discourse she heard growing up was: "you need to leave the country because we are woeful, and don't come back, go anywhere but don't stay here!" Henceforth, it becomes visible that social values associated with mobility as success influence young people's ideas of a 'good' life and aspirations. This indicates an emerging generational understanding of mobility as success.

Modern media, earlier international touristic experiences and wider education opportunities granted by the system of open borders towards the EU shaped ideas of a good life among young migrants. The young generation was raised in a highly globalized world, where Western values and modern conceptions of social justice are promoted on media platforms. Additionally, increased financial capabilities among Romanian families to go on international holidays led to young people's early exposure to different cultures. These factors generated feelings of curiosity and relative deprivation towards other young people living in Western Europe, fueled by consistent access to their private lives via social media. Interestingly, this reality is highly distinct from the more communitarian-oriented feelings of relative deprivation experienced by practically educated migrants.

Next to professional fulfilment, the non-economic aspirations of young migrants make their ideas of a 'good life' radically unique to previous generations. Personal growth is a central aspect of their discourse. Informants often link their ideas of a good life to a flexible, healthy work environment, which allows them to prioritize self-discovery and personal growth. This conceptual delineation is also formed in comparison to the experience of their parents. Especially when it comes to work life, young people have an acute awareness of the unhealthy work environment experienced by their parents. Conversely, mobility is now perceived as a personal growth vector in itself, as a new life aspiration:

> I have this aspiration to continue to grow and develop and to be in environments that I am challenged - I would very much like to, for example live in other countries besides [*current emigration country*]. I mean I can't stop moving now!

The interview findings highlight the non-economic reasons for migrating adopted by young people. International migration is now driven by curiosity and the will to discover new places. Student participants make use of multiple opportunities to experience life elsewhere – from gap years to scholarly exchanges, work-aways or volunteering projects. This highlights the intrinsic value attributed to migration, which is far from conventional understandings of migration as solely functional. This can be linked to the experience of higher mobility freedom among young Europeans and how, in turn, this shaped their ideas about migration. Ultimately, the inherent value attributed to mobility thus illustrates a new cultural understanding of a good life, representative of a generation raised in a world with less mobility restrictions.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the concrete ways in which macro social transformations alter life aspirations and ideas of a good life among Romanian emigrants. The analysis builds on 16 in-depth interviews with the dominant contemporary migration groups – lower/practically educated workers, highly educated workers, and students. For lower educated workers, migration represented a channel for improving their financial abilities in living a comfortable and secure life. In the case of highly educated workers, the decision to migrate was a 'balancing' act of pursuing the aspirations enabled by their level of professional preparation and lack of opportunities in the Romanian labour market. For students, migration is closely linked to their understanding of a good life, whereas emigration itself is an achievement. The former are now pursuing flexible, European lifestyles, where mobility represents an opportunity for discovery and personal growth.

Adopting an aspirations-capabilities framework advanced our understanding about the internal mechanisms behind consistent emigration rates from Romania to Western Europe. The study illustrated the non-linearity of development processes and the mobility aspirations associated with it. Finally, the findings invite us to question the assumption that development will reduce migration and to understand human mobility as naturally embedded in larger social changes.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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