

REMIGRATION OF ROMANIANS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND MIGRATIONAL PROSPECTS FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA *

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Abstract: *Romanians have engaged since 2007 on migration trajectories following a very clear road map, as a result of better regulation, networks and also better understanding of the West. In the past years the number of Romanians returning has increased, highlighting a new evolution, i.e the re-evaluation of the opportunities Romania has to offer in terms of profession and social life. In deciding whether returning is the suitable option, migrants take into account a wide range of motives, from personal approaches to professional considerations, from micro-sensitivities to marco-perceptions. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted migrational trends immediately, with measurable short term effects and also estimated long-term effects. Over 1.25 million Romanians, working and living abroad have returned to Romania (since March 2020, according to the Romanian Prime Minister, Ludovic Orban, under the pressure of the unknown in the country where they had migrated). This paper will look into official data regarding the levels of return and also to the aftermath of the return, whether it is a final return to Romania or only a stop in a circular migrational pattern. My research equally focuses on the perception migrants have on their prospective professional opportunities in Romania.*

Keywords: migration, return migration, migration theories, COVID-19, individual and family choices

Introduction

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Romania is the European Union country with the largest diaspora living in other countries of the bloc (almost 4 million people). The development of migratory movements from Romania over the last 20 years is a unique phenomenon that deserves the attention of researchers, politicians and society as a whole. Over the years, migration has triggered profound changes in the Romanian society, both in terms of relations between individuals and the overall functioning of societal mechanisms (including the relation with the diaspora). The theories explaining the patterns of Romanian migration and return are numerous, among which we have selected two of the most prominent: the neoclassical economic theories and the new economics of labour migration.

Migration theories relevant for the Romanian migrational context

We have considered the neoclassical economics theories and NELM to be most relevant in the context of the migrational fluctuations that were triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic (because of their postulates related to the motivations leading to the decision to migrate or return (rapid and without a lot of reflection in most of the cases)).

Neoclassical economic theories, originating in Todaro's conceptualizations¹ are the theories most often used to explain the phenomenon of migration because they build their argumentation on the existence of a simple and comprehensive dichotomy: push and pull factors. This twofold dynamic, specific to migration, has been considered by many researchers as solid enough to explain the migratory movement². According to this macroeconomic theory, international migration is the result of the differences in the demand and supply of jobs in different countries. Neoclassical economic theories are based on a series of postulates that explain how migration works³:

- International migration of workers is caused by pay gaps between countries
- Eliminating pay gaps will put an end to labor migration and migration as a whole.

¹ M. P. Todaro, *Internal Migration in Developing Countries: A Survey*, in: *Population and Economic Change in Developing Countries* (Editor: R. A. Easterlin), Chicago, University of Chicago Press Volume, 2010, pp. 365-370; <http://www.nber.org/books/east80-1>.

² D. S. Massey, J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, A. Pellegrino, E. J. Taylor, *Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal*, in: "Population and Development Review", Vol. 19, No. 3, 1993, pp. 433-434.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 435.

- Labor markets are the primary mechanisms by which international labor flows are established and other types of markets do not have a relevant effect on migration.
- Governments can control migration (emigration / immigration) by regulating and influencing the labour market.

The macroeconomic model of neoclassical economic theories in the field of migration has a microeconomic equivalent, based on the model of individual choice. According to this theory, rational actors decide to migrate following a cost-benefit calculation⁴, which makes them anticipate a positive result or a net profit - in financial terms, which comes as a result of the decision to migrate. The principles specific to this theory are⁵:

- International movements are dependent on differences between salaries / incomes in different countries (in the case of this theory we do not operate with absolute data but with the expectations of individual actors, related to income).
- Individual human capital (education, professional experience, training, language skills) are essential elements that increase the likelihood of international movements.
- Aggregate migration flows between countries are the sum of individual movements, which are based on decisions based on cost-benefit calculations.
- The size of the differences between the expectations related to the salaries / incomes of the individual actors, determines the magnitude of the migration flow⁶

Neoclassical economic theories are useful in explaining the migration of Romanians, in all stages of this phenomenon - the early 1990s, the late 90s and the first decade of the 2000s, but also the last type of migration, that of the highly qualified migrants⁷. The economic conditions were most often the ones that contributed to the Romanians' decision to leave the country. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic the return of Romanians was caused by a strong push factor (the pandemic as a health threat and the closure of different economic sectors from the EU countries leading to a temporary or permanent loss of their jobs for Romanians living abroad). The neoclassical theories could explain this return migration through a influx of labour force on the Romanian labour market that could lead to lower wages generating at

⁴ A. Solimano, *International Migration in the Age of Globalization*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 22-41.

⁵ Massey, *op. cit.*, pp. 436.

⁶ B. Chiswick & T. J. Hatton, *International Migration and Integration of Labour Markets*, in: M. D. Bordo, A. M. Taylor, J. G. Williamson (eds.), *Globalization in Historical Perspective*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 65-85; <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c9586>.

⁷ I. Alexe, *Al patrutea Val- Migratia Creierelor pe ruta Romania-Occident*, București, Fundatia Soros, 2011, p. 18.

certain point in the future a new migrational trend in the Romanian society (Ejobs- the largest workforce recruitment platform in Romania has revealed an increase of 35% in the search of jobs for the month of June 2020).

NELM (New Economics of Labour Migration), the second set of theories are useful in explaining both the phenomenon of migration and remigration/return. Unlike neoclassical economic theories, this set of theories appreciates that migration decisions are not made by individual actors, but by larger units of people, i.e. by families. Thus, maximizing income is not the only criterion pursued, but it is combined with minimizing the risks intrinsic to a migration decision)⁸.

In developed countries, the risks associated with a family's income are minimized through private insurance or government social programs, as opposed to developing countries where such institutional mechanisms are imperfect or inaccessible to poor families. In addition, in developed countries, lending to finance new projects is well-regulated and fully functional, while lending in developing countries is difficult to access for poor families (credit costs are exaggerated)⁹. In this way, as there is no safety net for poor families, the international migration movement remains the only viable solution. Is such a situation specific to Romania? Can this theory be used to explain the migration of Romanians? We can certainly speak for the waves of migration until 2012-2013 (when the effects of the economic crisis begin to attenuate and Romania enters a period of economic growth) because of the lack of mechanisms to reduce the propensity to leave (lack of reconversion solutions, unemployment benefits and social benefits that do not provide economic security, inaccessible investment loans for poor families -a relevant example would be that of families in need of subsistence farming, an activity that could be turned into a profitable one by investing in technology, etc.).

NELM (New Economics Labour Migration Theories) operate with hypotheses that are different from those specific to neoclassical economic theories. We focus on those that have added value to our study¹⁰

Families or other structures are the units with which they must operate in the study of migration, never with individuals.

- The difference between wages / incomes from different countries is not a necessary condition for international migration to take place. Families tend to diversify the risks they face, even if there are no salary / income differences that matter in the analysis.

⁸ Chiswick B & Hatton T. J, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-40.

⁹ D. S. Massey et alii, *op. cit.*, p. 435.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 443-449.

- International migration and employment or entrepreneurship in the local economy are not mutually exclusive.

- Governments can influence the number of migrants not only through labor market policies, but also through measures that regulate insurance - including unemployment insurance, capital markets, and so on. This type of measure is essential in the decision on migration.

- Government policies and economic changes that affect income distribution influence international migration regardless of the effects on average income. In fact, if the average increases but the incomes of the poorest do not increase, migration will increase, while if the increase in income does not affect wealthier households, migration is declining¹¹.

As far as the massive return of Romanians during the COVID-19 pandemic is concerned, NELM provides a relevant theoretical framework. Giving the implications the pandemic has on individual health, the role of the family in deciding to return is essential. Possible financial gains are overweighted by the importance of feeling safe. Moreover, in the context of the pandemic, all EU countries have taken social security measures aimed to protect vulnerable people (affected by the lockdown measures).

Migration and remigration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemics

Dumitru Sandu, one of the lead migration Romanian sociologists, explains in comprehensible dichotomies the way in which the migration of Romanians took place and still takes place: internal - external; temporary - permanent; over short or long distances; departure - arrival / return¹². In this article we tackle the temporary vs. permanent characteristic of migration and return in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, using a qualitative analysis of the testimonies of a number of Romanians that have returned since March 2020. We will equally look into institutional and market reactions to the massive return of Romanians and analyze what these measures and initiatives reveal in relation to the future of the people who have returned.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted global mobility in the form of significant travel disruptions, restrictions and blockages. Part of this abrupt process, Romanian migrants living and working abroad have been challenged in a serious manner (either losing their jobs and/or deciding to return because of the fear of being locked down). What we know by now, almost nine months from the outbreak is that the economic

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 446-449.

¹² D. Sandu, *Lumile sociale ale migrației românești în străinătate*, Iași, Polirom, 2010, p. 110.

crisis induced by COVID - 19 could be long, profound, and pervasive when viewed through a migration lens. Lockdowns, travel bans, and social distancing have brought global economic activities to a near standstill for almost 3 months and the recovery is slow.

Host/destination countries face additional challenges in many sectors, such as health and agriculture, that depend on the work of migrant workers. Migrants face the risk of contagion and also the possible loss of employment, wages, and health insurance coverage. The Migration and Development Brief provides a prognosis of how these events might affect global trends in international economic migration and remittances in 2020 and 2021. “Given the fact that migrants tend to be concentrated in urban economic centers (cities), and are vulnerable to infection by the coronavirus, there is a need to include migrants in efforts to fight the coronavirus. Migrant remittances provide an economic lifeline to poor households in many countries; a reduction in remittance flows could increase poverty and reduce households’ access to much - needed health services. The crisis could exacerbate xenophobic, discriminatory treatment of migrants, which calls for greater vigilance against such practices”¹³. A significant number of Romanians, especially those with no or low qualifications when abroad have to take up jobs that can be considered second order jobs, with low wages and high vulnerability in times of crisis. These Romanians will be profoundly affected by the COVID pandemic, as their jobs are usually economically essential to the household, through remittances. “Migrant workers tend to be particularly vulnerable, more than native-born workers, to losses of employment and wages during an economic crisis in their host country. During the global financial crisis, the average unemployment rate for foreign-born workers in the EU-28 countries rose from 11.1 percent in 2007 to 16.4 percent in 2009, significantly higher than the increase among native-born workers. Even a decade later, in 2018, the unemployment rate remained high for foreign-born workers, while it had fallen below the pre-crisis rate for native-born workers”¹⁴.

In terms of economic sectors, the crisis has disproportionately impacted food and hospitality, retail and wholesale, tourism and transport, and manufacturing. The farming season revealed labor shortages in the agriculture sector of industrial countries that rely on migrant workers. Given the seasonality of agriculture, worker shortages have given rise to concerns about food security later in the year. Romanian seasonal workers were recruited during the spike of the pandemic and during quarantine to offer their services for the agricultural sector in countries such as Germany and the UK. It

¹³ World Bank Group, COVID-19 Crisis-Through a Migration Lens, April 2020, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

was a moment of ethical debate whether the potential economic crisis in the agricultural field of one of the Western countries suffice to determine workers from Eastern countries to risk their health during a pandemic (with the unmitigated support of their home country, who eased the quarantine ban).

In addition, the pandemic has unprecedentedly increased the demand for health care services, and a global competition has already begun between most developed countries announcing incentives to recruit doctors and nurses from abroad. There is an obvious and urgent global need to train more health professionals and provide recognition of skills in host countries in the long term. Romania is already facing a deficit of medical care personnel, given the fact that salaries in the sector have been until recently very low triggering a massive brain drain (other motivations were added such as lack of professional opportunities and poor facilities and equipment). The pandemic will reveal if the medical sector of Romania is consolidated and whether it can keep medical staff in the country.

Remigration of Romanians during the pandemic- data and institutional measures

Data recorded by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Romania show that more 1.25 million Romanians have returned since the beginning of the pandemic. This abrupt change in the migrational trend poses major pressure on the Romanian labour market¹⁵.

The Romanian Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Violeta Alexandru, has announced that the companies that hire Romanians returnees because they lost their jobs abroad will benefit from support from the state. Thus, the companies will receive from the state 50% of the employee's salary, but not more than 2,500 lei (equivalent of approximately 500 euros). The measure covers the cases of those who had employment contracts abroad which were interrupted during this period for reasons not imputable to them¹⁶.

In addition to that, the Romanian Association of Highway Builders (ARCA) considers that the return of Romanians in the context of the pandemic represents a unique chance to maintain and capitalize on this category of labour force in the country¹⁷. Therefore, ARCA members propose to the employers in the field of constructions and to the responsible authorities in this sector, a plan for hiring

¹⁵<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/ludovic-orban-pest-127-milioane-de-romani-s-au-intors-in-tara-in-ultimele-doua-luni-1301881>, accessed August 2020.

¹⁶https://adevarul.ro/economie/stiri-economice/violeta-alexandru-statul-plati-50-salariul-romanilor-intorsi-strainatate-angajeaza-tara-1_5ed7505c5163ec427172a423/index.html, accessed August 2020.

Romanians who normally work abroad and who have returned to the country since the beginning of the pandemic. This would be a solution for the labour shortage in the construction sector (highway construction / rehabilitation, road construction / rehabilitation or urban networks in rural and urban areas, civil construction) given the fact that many Romanians who returned to the country are specialized in the field of constructions and can be easily integrated in the construction sites open at national level.

It is indisputable that public institutions and relevant stakeholders should step up and elaborate coherent solutions to reinsert the returnees to the labour market. Unfortunately, the Romanian state was unable during periods of economic stability to come up with sustainable solutions to stimulate the return of migrants and therefore the prospects of having efficient and adequate solutions with both short term and long term impact are scarce.

Remigration of Romanians during the pandemic- individual and family choices

We have conducted a qualitative research and for this purpose we have developed a set of questions that were addressed to 10 subjects who have returned after the outbreak of the pandemic. These questions focused on the migrational experience, the decision to return and the expectations related to the labour market in Romania. Even if guidance questions were used, we mostly encouraged the respondents to tell us the story during migration and also their plans related to the return. People we discussed with had been living in Italy, Germany and Austria and were employed in the hospitality sector, food processing industry constructions, and elderly care sector. The responses have all reflected some major topics and supratemes:

1. Anxiety and fear for their lives
2. The role of the family in taking the decision
3. Social and economic insecurity
4. Lack of prospects in Romania vs. Business opportunities in Romania

Anxiety and fear for their lives is the essential topic that was approached by the respondents in different degrees of tragism, depending on the country in which they were residing and working and also depending on the moment of return (earlier or later in the pandemic). The words used to express their motivation to return were: "I was frightened by the evolution of the disease in my region (Northern Italy) (Maria, 39 old), "everything that was shown in the media was so depressing and being away from

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<https://romanalibera.ro/economie/drumarii-au-nevoie-de-romanii-reveniti-in-tara-pentru-autostrazi-825737>, accessed August 2020.

my family was a stress factor too, all I had in mind was that I want to be healthy and be back to my family and Romania” (Ionela, 65) “I felt alone, even if I do have friends working with me, I felt at risk and unsafe (Marius, 54). Anxiety and fear has never been mentioned previously as a reason for return, so we believe that migration patterns in the new context of the pandemic need to be researched thoroughly.

Most of the Romanians who decided to return faced economic and social insecurity in the countries where they were residing, losing their jobs, having access to limited social security services if at all and having no clear professional perspective (mainly because of the insecurity the lockdown has triggered at the level of the entire society). “I had no reason to stay, the restaurant closed, my boss told us he did not know what would happen, so my only solution was to pack my things and come back to my mother” (Dana, 25). “All construction sites were suspending work and we were not useful anymore so there was no reason to stay there any longer” (Cristian, 47) These situations reveal a well-known reality, that of the fragile jobs and social statute of Romanians abroad. Most of the Romanian migrants who have returned during the pandemic fall into the category of people who are not protected by social security measures in the host country.

The role of the family in taking the decision to return-as the NELM theories argue, the family has an essential role in influencing decisions related to migration or return. It is the family that might need more financial support, it is the family that could take over some of the responsibilities of those who leave (such as taking care of the left behind children) and last but not least it is the family that might need the migrant to rejoin the family, for various reasons. In the context of the COVID 19 outbreak, migrants did not judge for themselves but for their families as well and took decisions after consultations. “My wife asked me to come back as soon as I could, she was absolutely scared” (Adrian, 36), “I had taken my family with me back in Austria for almost two years and once I lost my job I felt there was no other option for us all, but to return” (Călin, 38). “I have always considered my family important, and I made a lot of sacrifices to offer my children things that I did not have, but this disease scared me and made me think it is more important to be close to them than anything else” (Liliana, 59).

Lack of prospects in Romania is one of the major topics for most of the returnees who display very little confidence in their chances of having a decent living standard in Romania. They have left the country because of economic problems and have found an opportunity in gaining significantly more abroad (including supporting their families at home through remittances). Ionel (31) who had worked in constructions in Germany said:” I am sad to be back and worried for me and my family. I used to support my wife, two sons and my parents with my salary. This will not be possible in Romania. I

want to go back as soon as possible”. Mărioara, a “badanta” in Northern Italy says: “For me Romania is a deadend. It is not easy to do the job I do in a foreign country, but at least money was not a problem for me and my daughter who studies in Timișoara”. Some of the respondents seemed much more determined to explore the possibility of setting up a business (using the professional experience acquired during their stay abroad). “I have enough money to open a small pizzeria in my hometown, I will only wait for the crisis to go by” (Claudiu, 33). “Working for others in a foreign country was not easy, but at least I know now I am a good professional in constructions and I will create a small company with my brother and cousin (as they have both returned from Germany too). I came back with no intention of returning” (Laurențiu, 43).

All these recurrent topics: anxiety, fear, social and economic insecurity, the role of the family, the approach towards professional perspectives in Romania, reveal a new facet of migration and return migration, one that is triggered by the pandemic. These evolutions will shape migration and its characteristics in the long term, offering to sociologists a fertile ground for deeper research.

Conclusion

Romanian migration patterns are explained by different theories, among which neoclassical theories and NELM theories, which have a high relevance in the context of the return migration triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Return migration is a new phenomenon for Romania, and the qualitative study we have developed opens the debate about how it has to be approached, given the specific return reasons. Moreover, the influx of working force is an opportunity to be seized, both by institutions and the private sector where returnees should find consistent support.