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Recent Immigration from the Republic of Moldova and Arab Countries to Romania. A Stakeholders' Perspective on Local Integration

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Abstract

Romania, a net emigration country, has witnessed a significant increase in immigration over the last decade. The objective of this paper is to highlight the facilitators and barriers to local integration faced by recent immigrants to Romania, as expressed by relevant stakeholders. Their often neglected views hold particular relevance for improving the well-being and integration of migrants in Romania. We focus on young immigrants from the Republic of Moldova and from Arab countries, relying on the data from 13 interviews conducted in 2021 with various stakeholders. The results of the paper reveal different integration mechanisms for the two groups. Some barriers are similar, being mainly related to document validation and lack of family support. Other factors act differently for the two groups of migrants. For Moldovan youth, language and cultural familiarity facilitate their access to the labour market and education, whereas asylum seekers from Arab countries need longer for achieving local integration.

Keywords: Migration; stakeholders; asylum seekers; local integration

Introduction

Romania is mainly perceived as a net emigration country. However, during the past two decades the immigrant population has significantly increased and diversified (Manafi and Roman, 2022). Romania is also viewed as a transit country, and the transit may be shorter or longer depending on migration reasons. Asylum seekers may prioritize leaving Romania for family reunifications in other European destinations, while some young immigrants may decide to stay longer or pursue studies in Romania. According to Eurostat (2021), Romania's foreign-born population was only 3.6% of the total population. Of these, 2.3% were born in non-EU countries. As suggested by these figures, immigration to Romania is a less common phenomenon and has been scarcely studied so far.

Rentea (2013) examined whether and how the integration experience motivated immigrants to seek Romanian citizenship. However, societal integration of migrants remains challenging, as highlighted by Cervinschi (2011) and Spătaru and Iurco (2020), due to the public administration's multi-sectorial approach towards integration. The authors recommend

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greater public involvement, specialized research, and public authority engagement to facilitate the integration process. Economic, social, civic, cultural, and legal factors impact the quality of life and integration of migrants. Avram (2019) emphasizes the need for public authority involvement to ensure social inclusion and cohesion, whereas Cervinski (2011) believes that NGOs can play a crucial role in cases where public administration fails. This view is supported by an increase in private or community-based integration programmes since Romania's EU accession in 2007. However, current research mostly focuses on the government responsibility for immigrant integration, leaving the public-aided and privately-aided integration dyad underexplored and in need of further development. Following Ager and Strang's (2008) normative approach, we explore how the principles of citizenship and rights relate to public outcomes in areas such as employment, education, and health, and how these affect integrations.

The objective of this paper is to highlight the integration facilitators and barriers encountered by recent immigrants to Romania, as expressed by relevant stakeholders. To reflect the diversity of recent immigrants, we focus on two groups: immigrants from the neighbouring Republic of Moldova and those from Arab countries, although the two groups are not comparable in all characteristics (Cimpoeru et al., 2023). We also consider two main destinations for migrants: Iasi and Bucharest. Bucharest, as the capital city, offers many job and education opportunities and attracts the majority of migrants, while Iasi, the largest city in eastern Romania, is preferred by the Moldovan community. Our analysis focuses on two main criteria: the roles of integration facilitators and the barriers to integration. We present the similarities and contrasts between the two groups, also considering relevant local conditions in the two main destination cities.

This paper builds on the results obtained in the Horizon 2020 project “EMpowerment through liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in vulnerable conditions (MIMY)”. The methodology of the study relies on qualitative analysis, based on data from 13 interviews with relevant stakeholders, conducted in 2021. In our approach, stakeholders include, apart from the immigrants themselves, also all those involved, whether people or organizations, in facilitating the integration of newcomers into society without compromising their culture or their beliefs and values (see Aydar, 2022; Siarova and Van der Graaf, 2022; Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009). This paper addresses the gap in the existing literature on Romanian stakeholder perspectives on immigration. To our knowledge, it is the first paper incorporating their feedback to shape or improve the immigrants' wellbeing and their integration pathways in Romania.

Romanian Immigration and Integration Policies

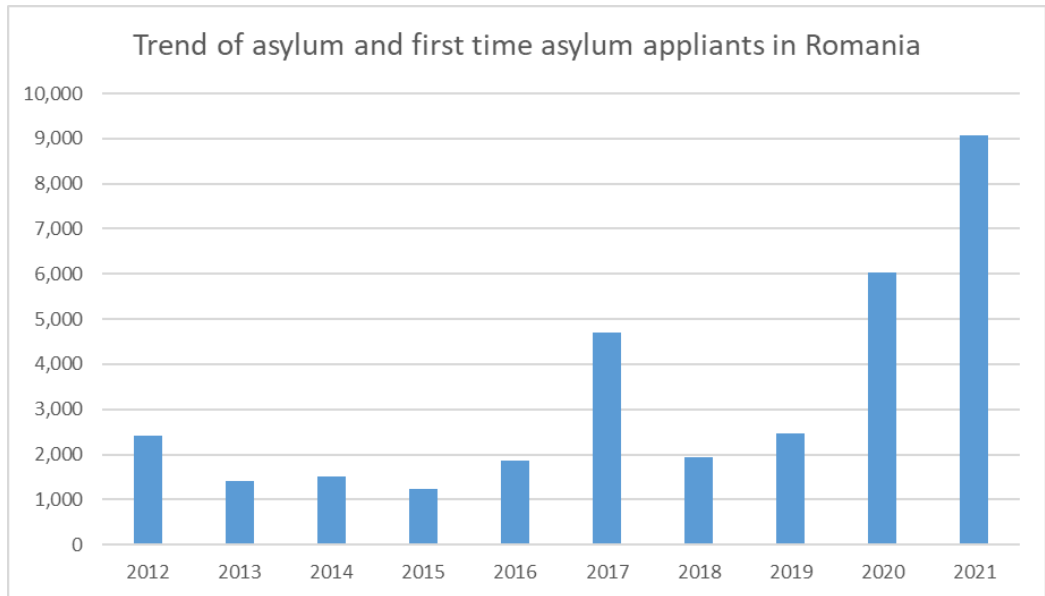
Immigration was not officially recognized or recorded by the Romanian authorities during the communist regime. 1991 was the first year when immigration statistics were reported by the National Institute of Statistics (Hamberger, 2010). Since 1990, incoming migration has consisted in voluntary and forced migrants. In the early 1990s, entrepreneurs especially from Turkey, the Middle East (Syria, Jordan) and China were the largest immigrant groups (Hamberger, 2010). In 1997-1998, due to the civil war in the Republic of Congo students from Congo and Cameroon who were studying in Romania became “refugees sur place”. Building on their experience, the following factors were identified as important for integration: acquisition of the Romanian language; access to work/jobs; levels of support that



refugees receive from both the Romanian and the African community; marriage to Romanian citizens or to co-nationals; and citizenship (Hamberger, 2010).

These initial phases of the Romanian immigration only marginally impacted the overall population, being locally driven by specific factors. During the last two decades, two distinct groups received visibility: immigrants from Moldova and from the Arab (MENA) countries. After the beginning of the Syrian war (2011) the number of refugees has significantly increased (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Trend of asylum and first-time asylum applicants in Romania



Source: Own representation using Eurostat data, 2022

A special case of immigrants to Romania are the Moldovans. Immigration from the Republic of Moldova started in the early 1990s, after the country declared its independence from the Soviet Union. According to the 2014 census in the Republic of Moldova⁵, over 2 million Romanian speakers live in the eight counties once part of the Principality of Moldavia. They declared themselves as Romanian ethnics (7%) or Moldovans. Significant numbers have emigrated to Romania looking for work or education opportunities. After 2007 many Moldovans received Romanian citizenship and implicitly the freedom to travel and work in the EU.

In Romania, the integration of immigrants is managed by public authorities, through the National Programme for Integration (NPI), and is mediated by various stakeholders, mainly NGOs. NPI aligns with EU standards and contributes to Romania's reaching immigration policy objectives. It offers social, medical, legal, psychological assistance to vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers, legal residents in Romania, persons who are already part of integration

⁵ Official data translated in English is available at: <https://recensamint.statistica.md/en>

programmes, and returnees. NPI prioritizes immigrant children's access to education and to facilities that are particularly relevant for the children's wellbeing.

In this (historical and legislative) context, youth immigration is growing and becoming more heterogeneous. In this paper we acknowledge this heterogeneity and focus on the two most relevant groups of immigrants, as well as on the migrants' main destinations, Iasi and Bucharest.

Method and Data

The methodology of the study relies on qualitative analysis, based on data from 13 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021 with stakeholders selected from different spheres relevant to integration, such as public institutions, international organizations and local NGOs. These included: education (language providers), lawyers working with migrants, social work, labour, and youth organisations (NGO representatives). The respondents' knowledge and/or direct experience of working with immigrants from both groups and destination cities were the main selection criteria. For the identification of the most representative participants from the above categories, we mapped the two local sites, Bucharest and Iasi, as destinations for our two case studies. The sample of the 13 respondents is described in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Participants in the research

Code	Location	Role	Gender	Migration background	Youth	Policy user / maker
CASE STUDY 1: Young migrants from Arab countries						
S1	Bucharest	International organization	Male	Yes	No	Policy user
S2	Bucharest	NGO	Male	No	No	Policy user
S3	Bucharest	Lawyer	Female	No	No	Policy user
S4	Iasi	Language provider	Female	No	No	Policy user
S5	Bucharest	NGO	Male	No	No	Policy user
S6	Bucharest	Language provider	Male	No	No	Policy user
S7	Bucharest	National coalition of institutions	Male	No	No	Policy maker
S8	Bucharest	International organization	Female	No	No	Policy user
CASE STUDY 2: Young migrants from the Republic of Moldova						
S9	Bucharest	NGO	Male	No	No	Policy user
S10	Bucharest	Language provider	Female	No	No	Policy user
S11	Iasi	Language provider	Female	No	No	Policy user
S12	Iasi	NGO	Female	Yes	Yes	Policy user
S13	Bucharest	International organization	Male	Yes	No	Policy user

The aim of the interviews was to engage respondents with direct experience of youth integration in reflecting on their experiences and sharing their knowledge. We contacted potential participants by email, to introduce the research project and to invite them to participate. Then we had a telephone conversation to explain their voluntary informed consent, and to capture demographic information, once they agreed to participate. The interviews covered the following thematic areas: understanding barriers to integration,



facilitating integration, responsibility and accountability for integration, interaction between local population and migrants. The interviews have, thus, provided the framework for gathering valuable examples for understanding the context, as well as facilitators and barriers to young migrants' integration in Romania.

Findings and Discussion

Migrant integration is a complex and progressive process that requires the cumulative effort of various stakeholders, the complexity of the process being acknowledged by the Romanian respondents. When asked to define integration, one of the respondents remarked:

Integration is a bi-dimensional process: efforts should be made by both local community and refugees. (S8)

Successful integration was seen as a process:

The ideal integration should be liquid. More specifically, it should follow several steps: After arrival, an intensive course of Romanian should be provided, then financial support, rents financed for one year, healing trauma, children enrolled in school, helping them to find a job and finally socializing opportunities should be addressed. (S8)

Integration facilitators

The interviews revealed three actors facilitating the migrants' integration in Romania: (i) institutions, (ii) education system and (iii) local population. Similar facilitators mediate local integration in the case of both groups.

Institutions, such as public authorities and NGOs working with migrants, are the main integration facilitators for both groups. For Moldovan migrants, NGOs such as student associations provide support for the newcomers. In the case of asylum seekers from Arab countries, an important role is played by the National Coalition for Refugee Integration (CNRR). This inter-ministerial committee is responsible for identifying refugees' needs, seeking optimal solutions, and ensuring the implementation of necessary measures, in accordance with Romania's objectives and responsibilities within the European framework.

The role of the NGOs in supporting vulnerable groups and providing legal aid is crucial:

The NGOs provide training for lawyers and reports on the context in the country of origin to assist the lawyers. When deemed necessary, the Bar distributes lawyers ex officio, but only few are taking cases of asylum seekers. (S3)

According to interview data, some of the lawyers are paid by NGOs. There are more lawyers specialized in asylum procedures in Bucharest, a city hosting more asylum seekers than Iasi. Another relevant stakeholder, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) addresses the needs of vulnerable groups and promotes equal rights for women and girls, and cooperates with civil society organizations, covering both locations.

The Education system is responsible for facilitating the integration of all migrant students. The respondents consider that universities are open to host many foreign students, and the help of different student organizations is beneficial,

but it is the university who should formalize this process. The universities should communicate with the students and translate the schedule. (S4).]

The University of Medicine in Iasi, for example, provides Counselling and Emotional Help for Students, available also for foreign students,

who are facing higher challenges and do need well-being help [...] but this Department should offer customised support to different ethnic groups. (S3)

When describing everyday interaction with Arab students, a stakeholder working at the University (S4) underlined how important it was for Romanian teachers to realize that students recently arrived from other countries did not know each other, nor the city, and that they were not familiar with the language and culture of the host community. Hence the importance of building in an induction to academic culture and expectations in the host environment. As compared to Arab students, for the Moldovan migrants it is easier to communicate with the local population, as they already know the language, and habits are similar to those in their home country.

Although Romania is considered a transit country, interestingly, after an emigration phase to other European countries, a share of the immigrants returns to Romania, in search for a more tolerant environment. Romanian people are not xenophobe and

refugees consider that the low level of discrimination in Romania is an advantage compared to other countries; in some cases, it compensates for other barriers. (S7)

At the same time, "it is more difficult to achieve integration and acceptance by the local population if you do not speak Romanian" (S4).

Respondents also pointed out that families integrate easier, considering that "*when you are a refugee, chance is especially important, as well as the entourage and family*" (S1), but if they are vulnerable, this vulnerability is transferred to young people. A further integration facilitator appears to be marriage to a local. "*About a third of the refugees in Romania get married to locals*" (S2), which helps with linguistic and cultural integration, a finding similar to that reported by Karaköse and Gökütuna Yaylacı (2023) with reference to Turkish immigrants in Poland.

Even if the local community is generally perceived as a facilitator, the interviews revealed that married women from more conservative Arab communities choose not to communicate with locals.

Finally, regarding the facilitating role of the *local communities*, it was acknowledged that, in general, Romanians in both locations, Bucharest and Iasi, are open, and migrants are not marginalized by the local community. In most cases, Romanians behave friendly with immigrants (regardless of location).

The local population is not xenophobe in Romania. It depends on how migration is presented in the media. In 2015 the local population was pro-migration. Afterwards they adjusted their views, becoming neutral. (S2)

Barriers to integration

According to the interviewed stakeholders, the two distinct groups of migrants face different challenges during their integration experiences. General barriers to the integration of Moldovan and Arab migrants to Romania are related to labour market access, language and education, cultural differences and health issues, as detailed below.



Barriers to work

In both locations, the immigrants face similar barriers to work. In Iasi there are more opportunities to work in agriculture, however, overall, the job offer is more diverse in Bucharest. Respondents pointed out that for asylum seekers, even after having completed work related administrative procedures, in reality, it takes longer (four to five years) until they become employable. They are employed with a minimum wage, in unqualified jobs or even illegally. The legislative framework is being developed, but the process is still slow.

Barriers to education

Integration into the Romanian education system and access to education presented difficulties for both groups of migrants. as reported by the stakeholders:

- Lack of financial support: they have no financial support and have no access to other educational programmes that are available for natives. For instance, migrants do not get access to a national programme supporting pupils by offering a free meal in schools.
- Lack of documents: if they do not have proof of studies in the country of origin, they must pass tests in all subjects, a process that is perceived as extremely difficult.
- Difficulty in tracing migrants' educational records: those who are not registered in national electronic databases have difficulties in providing their educational records.
- Bullying: Moldovan students sometimes face discrimination and bullying due to their speaking Romanian with a different accent (S12).

In addition to the above, refugees from Arab countries are facing barriers related to their needs of learning Romanian and integrating in the Romanian educational system. The interviews revealed the following:

- Lack of teachers to support educational programmes, especially for those with special education needs.
- Class size: *"It's hard with a class of 30 students."* (S9). There are also large numbers of children in inappropriate nursery classes, making the educational process more difficult.
- Adaptation difficulties for refugee minors: in the public education system, they are granted one year for attending regular classes, without being evaluated; then they continue studying in the same class but this procedure has proved to be inefficient.

Arab and Moldovan students are facing different bureaucratic challenges. Some of the Arab students (from Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine) receive their travel papers late and, therefore, manage to join University courses only in the middle of the semester. Moreover, refugees from Afghanistan often do not have birth certificates. Moldovan students, on the other hand,

often face financial difficulties, although they can benefit from different scholarships meant to facilitate their studies. These facts have been reported by the respondents in both locations.

Linguistic barriers

It is well known that language may represent an important barrier to integration. Language (as a barrier) acts differently in the case of the two groups, Romanian being a foreign language for Arab migrants and a native language for most of the Moldovan migrants. For the immigrants from the Republic of Moldova it is easier to integrate, as the majority already know the language, but, in some cases, they may encounter difficulties for their strong accent, especially in early stages of the integration process. Universities (both in Iasi and Bucharest) offer pre-sessional Romanian Language Courses that are mandatory for students who wish to pursue their studies in Romanian and do not have a language certificate in this sense. During this one-year, full-time academic programme, the international students will acquire the required skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in Romanian for academic purposes, but also specific knowledge related to their future training profile.

Cultural (un)familiarity

Activities related to cultural meetings and mentoring are provided by NGOs, with the help of public authorities. However, the respondents consider that these are insufficient and should be further developed for reaching a higher level of cultural familiarity. As both locations share similar cultural patterns, the two groups of immigrants did not have preferred destinations due to cultural reasons. Still, certain tendencies have been indicated by the interviewed stakeholders. Immigrants from the Republic of Moldova integrate easier in Iasi, because of the proximity to their homeland, while immigrants from Arab countries may have an already existing network in Bucharest and, therefore, tend to prefer Bucharest to settle in.

For Arab people family is especially important. There are no unaccompanied minors, they may travel together with relatives. (S1).

Since family relations are so important for Arab migrants, if they have their family with them, this has beneficial influences on them, but if their closest family members have remained in their country of origin, this may prompt them to discontinue their stay, as illustrated by the following quote:

A particularly good student dropped Faculty, as his parents decided he is far away. Families playing a special role, the mother is seen as a Saint and the professor/teacher is a kind of Prophet, the messenger of Allah. (S6)

Overall, Romanian family culture is perceived as fairly close to Arab culture.

Romanians are known for their readiness to learn and speak foreign languages. This does not mean, however, that they are equally familiar with the migrants' different cultures and languages, but in general, they are known for trying to communicate with and to accommodate foreign visitors.

Moldovan culture is significantly similar to Romanian culture, based on their common history, while the case of Arab migrants is different. A stakeholder teaching Romanian to Arab students described the difference between culturally heterogeneous groups and those that are mono-ethnic. She then also shared the strategy developed for cultural induction.



Arab students found it normal to enter or leave the course anytime (for speaking on the phone, for eating, etc.). So, I decided to start my Romanian language course with an introduction to cultural differences that I considered necessary. (S4)

Health and trauma

Health is a critical issue for both categories of migrants. Immigrants are not insured for about one year, and lack of medical insurance represents a real problem. But in the case of families, the interviews revealed that NGOs help a lot by covering the expenditures for medical insurance (S2, S3).

A part of the Arab refugees and students revealed their past trauma. A stakeholder teaching Romanian for foreign born students described the situation of a Medicine student from Aleppo (Syria) revealing the trauma related to the missing of his father.

His father had been taken prisoner and he did not know anything about him. After several weeks they received a phone call from those who had taken him prisoner and they demanded a huge ransom. Usually, families could not know if by paying the ransom the prisoner would be set free. But this case had a happy end – the family borrowed money, paid the ransom and the father was back home. (S6)

The interviewed stakeholders underlined that health and trauma related issues were most often not brought up by the migrants. The most vulnerable groups tend to be less communicative (S2). They tend to hide their lack of success and reveal their vulnerability only when truly desperate.

Conclusions

Using 13 interviews with Romanian migration stakeholders, the results of the study confirm different integration mechanisms for Arab and Moldovan migrants. Language is a relevant factor that acts differently for the two groups: it is a facilitator for Moldovan migrants and a barrier for migrants from Arab countries. Interaction with institutions and related bureaucracy have a similar impact on the integration of both groups of migrants. The barriers are alike for young people, being mainly related to the recognition of documents and lack of family support. On the other hand, access to the labour market and education seem to be easier for Moldovan youth than for Arab immigrants.

The facilitators are related to public and private institutions, education system and local communities. Local conditions and local communities play a crucial role for integration.

Even if immigration to Romania is increasing, Romania remains mainly a transit country. Asylum seekers from Arab countries may aim for a shorter stay in Romania, with the intention of leaving for Western Europe for family reunification. Others, particularly students, may choose a longer stay. As the study reveals, Moldovans may apply for different scholarships and are motivated by the university's European dimension. Also, a great share of Arab students choose to study in Romania "*on the chain of inheritance, students that are coming after their relatives (brothers, sisters, father) studied here*" (S6). After graduation, some will settle in here, some will return to their home countries, and some will go further. Their decision to stay or leave does not seem to be influenced by the local conditions.

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