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Editor's Choice

Storytelling the Integration of Eastern European Immigrants in The United States of America. A Pre- and Post-1989 Case Study for Romanian Migrants

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Introduction

The United States of America has long had the reputation of being built on the contributions of millions of immigrants who arrived and settled in what was believed to be a land of milk and honey—a place of endless possibilities. Whether or not this reality materialized for its inhabitants is irrelevant to what could be compared to an extremely effective "marketing technique" that turned the U.S. into one of the most attractive destinations for migrants in search of a better life, in pursuit of the so-called American Dream.

This case study aims to explore the everyday realities of immigrants living in the U.Sthe study is focused on the experiences of Eastern Europeans, with a specific emphasis on Romanians who have obtained American citizenship and have fully adapted to the American way of life. For Romanian citizens, the possibility of emigrating was significantly influenced by the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the collapse of the socialist regime led by Ceaușescu in the same year. This study will employ both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Relevant data has been collected on the experiences of Romanian emigrants who managed to reach the U.S. before and after 1989 and who also obtained American citizenship. Their adaptation process was the main focus of this research, but throughout the interviews, relevant information emerged regarding their migration experiences, which I found necessary to further explore.

The Evolution of U.S. Immigration Policies

Currently, the United States Census Bureau estimates that around 47 million people living in the U.S. were born outside the country (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Most of them entered the U.S. before the year 2000 (approximately 21 million). The lowest number of immigrants was recorded in the decade following the turn of the millennium, followed by a slight

increase after 2010. This highlights not only the migrants' preference for the U.S. but also their ability to enter and reside there. These estimates confirm transformations in the formal acceptance mechanisms for immigrants in the U.S. Not only has the number of immigrants decreased significantly—especially in the decade following the September 11 terrorist attacks—but naturalization rates among newcomers to the U.S. are also declining. While nearly three-quarters of foreigners who settled in the U.S. obtained citizenship before 2000, the current situation shows the exact opposite. The proportions have completely reversed.

"The United States is one of the few developed countries in the world that does not effectively control immigration" (Harrison, 1992). This statement appears at the very beginning of a 1992 article concerned with organizing the American immigration system at the time. Harrison quotes Emma Lazarus, stating that this principle underpinned the phenomenon of migration to the U.S.: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" (Harrison, 1992). These words were spoken nearly a century before the article's publication. By the time Harrison's work was published, the U.S. population had increased fivefold. The World Wars and their aftermath transformed the U.S. into a primary destination for European migrants fleeing former conflict zones. "The land of the free" seemed particularly appealing to citizens of communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe. Although it seemed easier to enter the U.S. before 2001 due to less restrictive policies, many foreign-born individuals still faced challenges in being accepted by the general population. Reports show that one-fifth of welfare recipients in California at the end of the 1980s were non-citizens (Harrison, 1992), a fact that was not viewed favorably by the public.

We will focus on the conditions immigrants from the 1980s and 2000s had to meet to enter the United States. The reason is related to the situations of my respondents, who fall into one of these two categories.

In the 1980s, specifically in 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was adopted—the first formal piece of legislation aimed at reducing the number of immigrants. IRCA strengthened borders and created specific legalization programs, imposing penalties on employers and putting pressure on the labor market to bring legal workers into the U.S. This law was mainly enforced to control the large influx of Mexican and South American immigrants illegally crossing the border. It also affected labor market conditions, making employers more reluctant to hire migrant workers,

especially those arriving from the southern border (Donato, Durand, & Massey, 1992).

In the 1990s, the United States saw the largest influx of immigrants in its history. However, it was also noted that poverty was much more likely among the foreign-born population during that period compared to previous decades (Briggs, 1996). This decade began with the passing of the 1990 Immigration Act, which increased the number of visas granted by almost 100,000 compared to the previous legislation. Family-based immigration was also subject to more permissive regulations, as was the issuance of non-immigrant/visitor visas (Leiden & Neal, 1990).

At the beginning of the 2000s, a major event changed the course of history, and American immigration policy was completely transformed. The September 11 terrorist attacks became the defining factor in the acceptance of immigrants into the U.S., with a strong focus on preventing the recurrence of such an event. The United States was suddenly at war with a stateless enemy. The War on Terror generated hatred within U.S. borders and a population suddenly gripped by fear—what some have called the product of the American authorities' lack of imagination (Zegart, 2007). The Department of Homeland Security was created, and the enforcement of immigration and border security laws became a priority (Mittelstadt, 2011). The perception of migration changed dramatically—from an issue with economic implications to one with major implications for national security.

“In terms of migration and border policy, the clear preference of internal security policy is one of closure and restriction. Since human mobility serves as a vector for the spread of global terrorism and the proliferation of terrorist agents, the 'safe' strategy is the one that eliminates (or at least reduces) such movement. In other words, states should be less willing to ‘risk migration’” (Rudolph, 2017).

Once the Soviet Union was no longer a threat to U.S. security, there was no longer a need to limit access to the already-formed “melting pot.” However, 9/11 led to the imposition of restrictions and precautions that made the defense measures taken during the Cold War seem minor in comparison to the defensive stance adopted by the U.S. to prevent future disasters (Rudolph, 2017).

It was a collective trauma for the American population, an unimaginable fear, as the attack occurred within the borders of what was supposed to be the land of dreams, freedom, and safety. The most shocking aspect of the attack was that it came from within. The terrorists were hiding in plain sight,

even holding bank accounts in the U.S., and it is now known that the FBI had sufficient information to prevent the attacks (Zegart, 2007). From that moment, immigrants were no longer seen just as job and opportunity thieves, but also as real threats to national security.

Profile of the *Romanian Immigrant*

There seems to be a certain lack of interest in the patterns of immigration and, in general, in the profile of immigrants from Eastern Europe. " The scarcity of information concerning Eastern European immigrants is regrettable because this sort of knowledge is necessary to develop culturally sensitive support programs and policies to help them adapt successfully to the new society." (Robila, 2007). When discussing an immigrant profile, I would like to emphasize a few relevant aspects regarding potential integration into the host community: (a) linguistic knowledge and abilities – as language is an essential aspect in adapting to new societies; (b) socio-economic background – which significantly affects adaptation, such as the ability to support a certain standard of living and cover health and education costs; (c) the level of education upon arrival in the host country – a factor that can influence the previous two (Robila, 2007).

Data from the 2000s show that Romanian immigrants ranked third in terms of education level among Eastern European immigrants in the U.S. Robila's results also indicate that Romanians did not speak English at home as much as other Eastern European immigrants, and Romanian households were not among the highest earners in this immigrant category. However, they still ranked in the top half of the 17 countries of origin considered in the migration data. Although many Romanians living in the U.S. today seem to have satisfactory incomes, this national group also appears in the upper half of the ranking of households living below the poverty line.

As previously mentioned, a good indicator of the potential for financial success in the host country seems to be the socio-economic background. According to Robila's research (2007), the Baltic states had the best income levels and were the most developed among the former Soviet states, and therefore, seemed to have "sent" immigrants with a higher likelihood of financial success in the U.S.

Another important aspect to consider is the process of acculturation. Immigrants move into a completely different culture from their own, which means that there are four main ways in which they may live (culturally) in the host country – a process called acculturation: separation, where the host

culture is avoided; marginalization, where both the original and new cultures are rejected; integration, which involves embracing both cultures; and assimilation, which means giving up the original culture in favor of the new one.

Romanians tend to have collectivist views of society, which means that the presence of a community can reduce difficulties related to the acculturation process and can lead more easily to assimilation. The community does not necessarily include only other Romanian immigrants, but may also consist of other Eastern Europeans or Spanish-speaking people (Markley & Lepadatu, 2015). Language and shared cultural elements are strong "bonding agents."

Methodology

One of the first questions posed on this topic was about the general process of integration into the host country of former migrants who went on to become naturalized citizens of the destination state. How did this process unfold, and what kind of experiences did they encounter along the way? It was intentionally avoided labeling the experiences of the interviewees as "difficulties," as it was wanted to eliminate any bias in this research that might assume these people only went through hardships while adapting to a completely new culture. However, the interviews did explore the possibility of culture shock occurring during their experiences. This subject was a significant part of the discussion.

The term "immigrant" will be used to describe individuals born outside the United States who currently reside within the country. Immigrants may choose to maintain this legal status (without acquiring or seeking citizenship), or they may choose to become naturalized citizens. Naturalization corresponds to the intention to formally engage in the political situation of the residence country, officially accepting and assuming the culture of their new nation. The intentions behind this process also include gaining access to the benefits enjoyed by citizens. One could say that the decision to become a naturalized citizen "shows an ideological commitment that goes beyond the intent to live and work in the United States simply for money" (Gjelten, 2015, p. 403).

It is worth mentioning the multidisciplinary nature of this discussion. Although the proposed approach is anthropological, migration as a general topic is very broad and typically involves information from various social sciences (Horevitz, 2009). There is general information that can be attributed

to political science or general theories of migration and immigration. However, the used perspective in analyzing this information will focus on the human aspect of the naturalization process and the adaptation of new American citizens to their new nation and culture.

This case study focused on a small sample (two interviewees). It could be argued that the sample is too small to allow for generalizations in discussing the results of the study. Therefore, it was intended to avoid making general statements based solely on the responses of the interviewed participants, except in cases where additional research confirms potential hypotheses. This model will be visible in the interview discussion. The interviews were conducted in a more informal manner, after having presented a basic theoretical framework. The stories shared by the respondents seem to reflect elements found in the academic literature cited.

The interviews were conducted online via video conferencing at the beginning of January 2025. Although an interview grid had been drafted for these discussions, it was necessary to maintain a natural conversational flow and to create a comfortable enough space for the respondents so that they could recall and feel motivated to share their experiences with minimal filtering. Therefore, the questions became semi-structured, allowing for follow-up and in-depth questions where information lacked clarity or sufficient support. The main purpose of the interviews was discovery, not the confirmation of previously formulated hypotheses—even subconscious ones.

The interview guide aimed to gather data on the entire process of obtaining American citizenship. One of the respondents was a man over 70 years old who arrived in the Land of Opportunity in the 1980s. In this particular case, the questions were also extended to the process of leaving Romania before the fall of the communist regime, especially considering the well-known poor living conditions of the 1980s. The second interview was with a woman of about 40 years old, who moved to the U.S. in the early 2000s. In her case, the focus was on the integration process following a dramatic and impactful societal event—the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Given the theme of this study, the sample might appear ideally homogeneous: Romanian immigrants in the United States who obtained American citizenship. For generalization purposes, a larger number of respondents would probably have represented a more appropriate sample size. Depending on various researchers' opinions, a number between 10 and even 40 participants would have been more suitable for relevant results.

Nevertheless, even individual cases can "offer reliable indications of future research directions" (Boddy, 2016).
Presenting the elements above is intended to establish a theoretical foundation for the information obtained through the interviews conducted for this paper. The next section, which will present the data resulting from the interviews, should be perceived more as a part in which, through the storytelling of these individuals, we can observe the studied trends and their implications within the previously presented theoretical framework. Interviews were conducted with two Romanians who are now naturalized American citizens.
In what follows, the initials of their first names will be used to refer to the two respondents. The reasoning behind this choice is the desire to keep the focus solely on their stories, their lived experiences, and their integration journeys, without their names distracting from the essence of their narratives.

The Case of M

M is a Romanian man in his 70s who currently lives in Miami, Florida. He shared his story of how he fled communist Romania in the early 1980s and arrived in the United States alone. Although he is a Romanian citizen, his ethnic and cultural background is more complex: his father was of Hungarian descent but a Romanian citizen, while his mother had Italian and Jewish roots. M was born and raised in a large family in rural Romania, near Timișoara. Until his departure, he was fully adapted to life in communist rural Romania. He described that period as a difficult time, despite being relatively close to an urban center. His experience was typical of a poor family living under a socialist regime.
One major advantage was that, due to his mother's heritage, he also held Italian citizenship, which proved essential when he wanted to leave the country. He married young and had a child in Romania. The living conditions did not satisfy him, especially after staying in contact with relatives in Italy and learning about a different way of life. He was determined to flee and take his family with him, but he initially failed to obtain political asylum for all family members. His Italian passport helped him reach Italy, where he had three options: remain in Italy, go to Canada, or go to the United States. He learned that going to the U.S. would give him better chances of obtaining political asylum for his family due to more lenient family reunification policies. He left alone, and a few months later—almost a year—his wife and son joined him in Miami.

Because of his Jewish background, he was assured support from the Jewish community in the U.S., which provided housing, a job, and help with integration. Neither he nor his family spoke English upon arrival, but he said that language was not the biggest challenge in the integration process. After many years of hard work, he managed to open his own Italian restaurant, which he later turned into a franchise. Today, he is retired and lives peacefully with his wife in Miami.

M has a deep appreciation for American culture, and his path of acculturation fits the assimilation model. He speaks fluent Romanian but with an American accent, still enjoys Romanian cuisine, but has fully adopted the American lifestyle. When asked why he chose the U.S., he said, "I wanted freedom." He added that he was a little disappointed when he first arrived in America—the country that had been idealized in all the stories wasn't quite as grand. "I expected all the houses to be bigger, more special. But they were normal. Some even small, and some looked poor," he said, laughing.

His wife, L, who is 100% Romanian by origin, also joined the conversation. She said that her integration experience was different from her husband's. While M managed to build a community based on his Jewish and Italian roots, she often felt like an outsider. She recalled an incident where a customer at their Italian restaurant was visibly surprised to see someone who wasn't Italian working there. This wasn't an isolated incident, and she frequently faced similar stereotypes.

Nevertheless, both M and L fully embraced the American lifestyle without completely severing ties with their culture of origin. M still follows Romanian politics and even visited the country right after the fall of the communist regime, but they never considered moving back permanently. They don't get involved in Romanian politics, even though they still hold Romanian citizenship.

Regarding naturalization, M said it was relatively easy to obtain U.S. citizenship. "I lived in the U.S. for a few years after receiving political asylum; after getting the Green Card, we could become citizens, but we still had to wait a while." He's aware that it's much harder to obtain citizenship today, and he believes that since September 11, 2001, there has been a more reserved attitude toward immigrants. M sees himself as the perfect example of an Eastern European immigrant who successfully adapted to the American lifestyle before 1989 and before 9/11.

The Case of R

The next story is that of R, a woman in her 40s who moved to the U.S. in the early 2000s. She already had two daughters before emigrating. She is married to a man originally from the former Yugoslavia. She comes from a middle-upper-class background and had the opportunity to complete her high school and university studies in Romania's capital after the fall of communism. She described herself as "rebellious" and took the chance to work in Japan when it came. After marrying, she and her husband moved to Germany for nearly a decade due to a job promotion he received. That promotion eventually led to a transfer to the company's headquarters in the U.S. Convinced by the idea of the American dream, they took the leap.

Much like M, though in a much less stressful context, they were offered jobs, housing, and a welcoming community. They are now also naturalized American citizens. However, the integration process was very different from M's experience. Both spoke English upon arrival, but American society was not as welcoming.

R fits more within the integration branch of acculturation but with elements of isolation. She does not have the same positive view of American culture as M, especially when it comes to immigrant integration, racial acceptance, and general tolerance. "I'd say there is no society more racist than American society today. You can't even just be white. My children were accused of being of different races—one daughter has darker skin, the other is very pale. I'm not very pale myself because my skin is darker than my husband's, who could be considered very white. All this was said to us directly."

R believes that precisely because the U.S. is a cultural melting pot, the lack of understanding among its components is inevitable. Today's political polarization in American society is one of the reasons she's eager to retire in Romania. She pointed out that there are multiple "types" of Romanians in the U.S., and without realizing it, she perfectly described the four types of acculturation.

She expressed frustration with Romanians who, in her view, have completely forgotten their roots. What M saw as a positive trait of American culture—the freedom to "be whoever you want to be"—R sees as something incomprehensible. She gave an example: a Romanian friend married an American man who became an Orthodox priest. R believes he doesn't fully understand what being an Orthodox priest means in the Romanian cultural context, but "he doesn't care and does it superficially."

Like L's story, R also experienced stereotypes and discrimination. She recalled a party where a former military officer accused her of being a spy simply because she caught a falling glass before it shattered and because she speaks several foreign languages. At first, she thought it was a joke but realized they were serious. R believes her family is an atypical case of Eastern European immigrants, though she knows other families with similar experiences. Most Romanian families who fled communism and arrived in the U.S. no longer consider returning. R remains connected to Romanian politics and culture and often visits to see her friends. However, like M, she doesn't want to get involved in Romanian politics from abroad, as it no longer directly affects her.

Conclusions

Through this interview project, it was aimed to find answers to three main questions. First, understanding what drives Romanians to leave the country and settle in the United States was an objective. Why the U.S.? It seems that this destination may be influenced by its powerful marketing as the "Land of Freedom" or a cultural melting pot (though it is encouraged of readers to take that with a grain of salt), but in every case, there were also external circumstances that made it possible. Many Romanians arrived in the U.S. before the fall of the Iron Curtain, seeking political asylum. Those who emigrated after 1989 were not only trying to escape the former Soviet state but also seized job opportunities and visa lotteries. (Markley & Lepadatu, 2015)

Second, exploring their integration process was another aim of the study. Based on the theoretical framework discussed earlier, one of the questions was whether language proficiency, socioeconomic background, and education played a role in their adaptation. While these elements statistically seem relevant to immigrant integration, in the two specific cases closely examined, knowing the language before arrival didn't significantly affect their experiences. In fact, the outcome was almost the opposite of what the statistics suggest. In one case, the person didn't speak English and still believed the U.S. was the best option; in the other, the person spoke English yet now wants to return to their country of origin, even after naturalization. The same applies to educational and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Third, their connection to their country of origin was addressed. Neither case lost contact with Romanian culture, language, or traditions. Both showed interest in Romania's situation, though without direct political involvement.
This research is relevant in identifying the cultural practices, functioning, and existence of a fairly large group of people who have yet to receive much academic attention. It serves as a strong starting point for future studies and may inspire further curiosity about this specific group of Romanian immigrants. During the literature review, it is noticeable that most data is collected through statistical work and quantitative methods. However, in this case the study is based on qualitative research that offers a better understanding of any studied phenomenon, especially those related to immigrants and their underlying thought processes.

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