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Editor's Choice

IMMIGRANTS FOR THE EMIGRANTS: MIGRATION AND THE FUTURE OF ROMANIA

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Migration has been a part of Romania's history for centuries. From the 19th century, when Romanians emigrated to the United States in search of better economic opportunities, to the more recent wave of migration to Western Europe, the quest for a better life has shaped the lives of millions. For many Romanians, emigration has meant escaping poverty, seeking new prospects, and fulfilling the hopes of families who wish for a brighter future.

In the 1990s, as Romania emerged from the shadows of the Soviet Union and opened up to the world, migration became for many, not only an aspiration but a vital necessity caused by the economic situation. My father, like many others, attempted to seek a better future abroad. He applied for a visa to Germany, hoping to provide for our family, but he failed to convince the embassy officer that he would only be a temporary visitor – I would like to thank that officer for preventing him from leaving, which ultimately allowed my father to stay with us and contribute to our family's future in ways that migration could not have. At that time, securing a work permit as an Eastern European citizen was exceedingly difficult, and many, like my father, had little option but to turn their hopes to emigration.

The turning point came in 2007, when Romania became part of the European Union (EU). This opened new opportunities, allowing Romanians to live, work, and travel freely within the EU. Initially, many believed that their migration would be temporary, but what was meant to be a brief period abroad turned into years for millions of Romanians. The exodus not only left emotional wounds – separating parents from children (Save the Children, n.d.) – but also resulted in a massive loss of human capital, with skilled and educated workers leaving Romania's labour market.

Today, some of those who have lived and worked abroad for over 17 years are considering returning to Romania. However, the path back is fraught with challenges. The difficulty of reintegrating, both socially and

economically, often leads them to reconsider. Meanwhile, migration to Romania is now coming from countries less economically developed than Romania was two decades ago.

Currently, approximately 150,000 non-EU migrants reside in Romania (General Inspectorate for Immigration, 2023). This number often surprises many; when I ask an audience, "How many migrants do you think live in Romania?" the typical response is usually 1 million or more (Council of the European Union, 2018). In truth, these approximately 150,000 non-EU migrants play a vital role in Romania's economy and society. They have become an essential part of Romania's workforce, filling labour shortages in sectors such as construction, hospitality, and services by building infrastructure, constructing homes, and providing essential support. In fact, the presence of these migrants has had a tangible impact on Romania's economic growth. According to the National Institute of Statistics, the construction sector, where many non-EU migrants work, has been a key driver of GDP growth (National Institute of Statistics, 2024). Furthermore, migrants sustain the labour market in regions where local workers are in short supply, ensuring that the country's development continues despite a declining working-age population.

Romania's transformation over the past two decades has been notable, though not always fully acknowledged. Economic growth driven in part by the labour of non-EU migrants has supported Romania emerge as a more attractive destination for investment and skilled workers. For those considering returning to Romania, the country they left behind may appear more promising than ever before.

In recent years, Romania has made significant strides in addressing labour shortages by increasing its annual quota for non-EU migrant workers. In 2023, the Romanian Government set a limit of 100,000 work permits for non-EU citizens, aiming to fill critical gaps in sectors such as construction and hospitality, a notable rise compared to 5,500 work permits approved in 2017 (Romanian Government, 2024). Currently, the main types of residence are labour purpose, family members, study and permanent residence, with the main countries of origin being: Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, Turkiye, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

At the European Union level, non-EU citizens represent a growing segment of the population (European Commission, 2024). As of 2023, there were 27.3 million non-EU citizens residing in EU member states, accounting for 6.1% of the EU population.

In contrast, Romania's percentage of non-EU migrants remains notably lower compared to the broader EU at around 1% of the population, though this is expected to change as the demand for labour continues to rise. The increased influx of migrants will likely be driven by the implementation of EU and Resilience funding, which will bolster critical infrastructure projects and stimulate economic growth in Romania through 2027.

Migration has played a crucial role in Europe's demographic growth, particularly in countries experiencing population decline. Positive net migration has been a key factor in sustaining and even increasing population numbers in several EU countries. For instance, in 2022, 5.1 million immigrants arrived in the EU from non-EU countries, contributing to the overall population growth (Eurostat, 2024).

This trend highlights the importance of migration in addressing demographic challenges and supporting economic development.

To fully harness the potential of migration, it is essential to implement effective integration and inclusion practices that can reduce the integration period to just a few months. Research shows that well-designed integration and inclusion programs can significantly reduce the time it takes for migrants to adapt to their new environment. Aiming for integration and inclusion periods of six months or less can lead to better economic outcomes for both migrants and host societies. Such programs should focus on language acquisition, cultural orientation, and access to employment opportunities, ensuring that migrants can contribute effectively to their new communities.

But here's the powerful truth: the Romanians that emigrated hoping for a better life abroad, are now being supported by those who have come to Romania seeking their own opportunity. While the emigrants built lives elsewhere, it is the immigrants who are now playing an important role in sustaining the economic development of Romania—repairing roads, constructing homes, and providing essential services—so that when those who left return, they find a country that is better than the one they left behind. In a way, it is the immigrants who are shaping the future for the emigrants.

Migration, when managed well, can be a force for good. It creates opportunities for both the host society and the migrants themselves. Romania is a nation of both emigrants and immigrants. And the immigrants are doing their part to ensure that when the emigrants return, they will come

home to a place that is stronger, more prosperous, and ready to welcome them back.

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