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Raluca Prelipceanu: Highly-Skilled Migration and Societal Transformation in Romania: Implications for EU Integration

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Abstract

Under communism, Romanians, in common with other Eastern European populations, endured confinement to the communist space, which has often been described as a geographic prison. The only forms of international migration allowed during communism were ethnic migration and some very restricted labour migration to other communist countries and certain Western countries. The fall of communism ushered in the possibility of free movement for Eastern Europeans and at the same time the opportunity for these countries to receive migrants. Mobility was finally an option for millions of people.

The first part of the paper is an attempt to assess the importance of this phenomenon during both the communist and post-communist periods and the main strategies employed by Romanian skilled migrants in order to circulate in the European space with special emphasis on the case of the Romanian community in France. To this end, a case study on highly-skilled Romanians in France is presented. First of all we describe the sample used and try to shed light on the reasons for departure and on the choice of destination as well as on the strategies employed in order to get to France. The migrants' performance in the French labour markets and the issues of social integration and identity will also be addressed. In the last part of our paper, we study the contacts developed with the home society and with other communities in the light of changes in information and communication technology. We then proceed to analyse the emergent network culture that is based on this web of new social ties.

1. A Picture of the Romanian Highly-Skilled Migration during and after Communism

The collapse of communism brought about sweeping changes in the migratory patterns of Eastern Europeans. The beginning of the 1990s saw an upsurge of forms of mobility in Eastern Europe. Some of these were new, while others were merely the amplification of forms already present in the Eastern migratory space during communism. Many studies on Romanian migration emphasise the mobility of low-skilled workers, who often migrated illegally (and made the headlines of European newspapers); the mobility of the highly skilled tends to be ignored. In reality, highly-skilled migration flows developed in parallel with low-skilled flows.

Even if the mobility of the highly skilled has seen an important upsurge in recent years, Romania faced a brain drain on a smaller scale even during the communist period. As part of the ethnic migration agreements concluded with Israel, Hungary and Germany and also of an agreement with the US, almost 300,000 persons left Romania during the 1980s. The majority of these persons had a tertiary education level acquired in Romania. Besides these countries, the Romanian Ministry of Home Affairs also acknowledged flows of qualified Romanians to France, Canada and Australia. Thus, brain drain is not a new form of mobility but one which has experienced important transformations and developments since the fall of communism.

Romania ranked among the top thirty countries in terms of its stock of highly-skilled migrants in 2000, with a total of 176,393 Romanian nationals living abroad.¹ About 54.3% of these highly-skilled migrants lived in North America, with only 29.3% residing in EU countries and another 12.3% in other European countries. But even considering the preference of the migrants for North America, Romania still ranked among the top twenty-five countries supplying highly-skilled migrants to the EU-15.²

As the development of this form of mobility has become particularly clear in recent years, the study of the flows allows for an analysis which is even more interesting. In 2005, more than a quarter of Romanian

1 Docquier, F. and Marfouk, A. *International migration by educational attainment (1990–2000): Release 1.1, Policy Report DP*. Washington DC: World Bank, 2005.

2 Docquier, F. O. Lohest and A. Marfouk 2005 Union européenne et migrations internationales: L'UE15 contribue-t-elle à l'exode des travailleurs qualifiés? *Revue Economique*, 2006, 56, 6, pp. 1301–1330.

emigrants were highly skilled, the rate being slightly higher in the case of men (28.5%) than of women (25.1%), as reported by the National Institute of Statistics (2005). Whereas the US and Canada are the main destinations for highly-skilled Romanians, Romania along with Turkey also ranks first as a country of origin for highly-skilled foreign residents in the enlarged Europe (which includes also ex-USSR and ex-Yugoslav countries and Turkey)³.

At the EU-15 level in the early 1990s, most highly-skilled Romanians went to Germany (Straubhaar 2000), but this no longer held true in 2000. What we have seen is a diversification of the destinations of highly-skilled Romanians in the EU-15. Radu (2003)⁴ has shown that the countries with the highest selectivity rate for Romanian migrants among the EU-15 are France and the United Kingdom, whereas Germany came third with a rate of selectivity just slightly exceeding the EU-15 average.

The persons involved in this type of mobility are mostly young. A study conducted by the Open Society Foundation showed that more than 15,000 young people have been leaving Romania every year for the last six years once they finished their studies and a quarter of high-school students intended to leave during their undergraduate studies or after. According to the Romanian Passport Department and the Frontier Police, the rate of return for those who leave to study abroad is a mere 10%.

2. The Romanian Community in France

According to OECD estimates, there are about 10,000 highly-skilled Romanians in France, which represents a quarter of the Romanians living in France; another 10,000 were in an illegal situation before Romania joined the EU. However, the precise number of Romanians in France remains a mystery. The Romanian authorities place it at around 60,000, while informal sources often speak of 100,000. According to these sources, about 40,000 live in Paris and Ile-de-France, whereas the rest are spread all over the French territory. The most important poles of Romanian communities can be found near Strasbourg, Lille, Lyon (which has an important Roma community), Marseille, Montpellier and Bordeaux.⁵

France is one of the traditional destinations for Romanian migrants. Throughout Romania's history, France has represented a model for Romania and the ties established with this country have been particularly strong. We can identify several waves of Romanian highly-skilled migration to France. First of all, a wave of Romanian intellectuals and aristocrats exiled themselves to France during the early days of the communist regime in Romania between 1946 and 1948. Even at the end of the 1950s, some Romanian intellectuals managed to arrive in France either as tourists, or simply because the communist leadership thought it best to get rid of persons perceived as a threat to the new regime and granted them the right to join family already in France.

Another wave had its origin in the labour migration from Romania during the 1960s, when, under specific labour agreements, some Romanian specialists went to work in North African countries. Once their contracts had ended, some of these people, mostly scientists, never returned to Romania, but instead went to France and obtained political refugee status.

During the 1990s, with the dismantling of political frontiers, many intellectuals fled abroad, some of them choosing France. Following the invasion of Bucharest by miners in the summer of 1990, a sign of possible political instability to come, it is estimated that 5,000 Romanian students left the country. The departures continued throughout the 1990s, with many Romanians leaving during their undergraduate studies. As the status of political refugee became more and more difficult to acquire and labour contracts favoured very specific domains (such as high tech fields), this strategy was adopted by a wider range of highly-skilled persons coming from other fields in order to later gain access to the foreign labour market. With the emer-

3 OECD. *Perspectives des migrations internationales*. Paris: OCDE, 2006.

4 Radu, D. 'Human Capital Content and Selectivity of Romanian Emigration', Luxembourg Income Study, document de travail no. 365, 2003.

5 Michaud M. *La Communauté roumaine en France*. Fonds Européen pour la Liberté de l'Expression. 1995.

gence of a network of student exchange programmes, France rapidly became one of the main destinations for study abroad.⁶ However, this proved to be a mere strategy for leaving the country, with many students never coming back. In fact, the rate of return was so small that France reconsidered its policies in this area, and tried to develop joint programmes that would encourage Romanian students to return home once their studies were finished.

In light of Romania's future accession to the EU, the further development of these programmes led to an important increase in the number of those who left the country in early 2000. Focusing on Romanians who have migrated to France within the last ten years, our study is mostly concerned with this fourth and last wave of Romanian migration. We must emphasise that the conditions under which this wave developed are very different from those concerning the former three. In this case, Romania's accession to the EU was clearly in view and political conditions could no longer be considered unstable. The rate of growth of the Romanian economy was steadily increasing and foreign enterprises were investing in highly-skilled intensive sectors of the Romanian economy, creating the opportunity for well-paid jobs. For the first two waves, which took place during communism, there was no possibility of return and all ties with the country of origin and with those left behind were severed for what seemed to be forever. The third wave developed under the difficult conditions of the Romanian transition, characterised by no economic opportunities and the worsening of living conditions. Compared to the former waves, for which the future seemed clearly defined and rooted in the country of destination, we can consider the future prospects of this last wave as being open ended.

3. Case study: Romanian Highly-Skilled Migrants in France in the Last Ten Years

Our case study relies on twenty exploratory interviews that we conducted in France during March and April 2006. We then drew up a questionnaire that was filled in by 125 persons. Our sample can be described as follows. As previously mentioned, this most recent form of mobility concerns mostly youth and 48% of our sample fell between the ages of 26 and 30. All these persons had a tertiary education acquired either in Romania or France. The average time already spent in France by these people ranged from two to five years. Two thirds of our sample population was made up of women, which is in accordance with studies by Badie and de Wenden (2001).⁷

As the history of migrants begins in their country of origin, we will first investigate who these people were before their departure from Romania. First of all, they were among the best and brightest Romanian students. They came from all eight NUTS II level regions and from 33 of the 41 Romanian counties. As a region of origin, the capital Bucharest-Ilfov ranked first with 27.2 per cent of the migrants. Another 16.8% came from the North-Eastern region and 14.4 per cent from the South-Muntenia region. As far as universities are concerned, the primacy of the universities of Bucharest is clear, with 54.4% of the sample having studied there. Bucharest is followed by the universities of Cluj and Iasi.

We can thus identify a 'capital' effect, with Bucharest attracting an important number of Romanian students due to the quality and the diversity of the studies offered there as well as to the availability of better job opportunities upon graduation.

In terms of the fields of specialisation, among men we identify mostly high tech specialists (32.6%) and economists (30.4%), followed by mathematicians, while among women we identify mostly economists (34.2%) and philologists (15.2%). The diversity of fields is greater in the case of women. Six of the individuals in our sample had a double degree and nine had completed their entire college education in France.

6 Lagrave, R. M. *Voyage dans un pays de l'utopie déçoue*. Paris: PUF, 1998.

7 Badie, B., Wihtol de Wenden, C. *Le défi migratoire: questions de relations internationales*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Politiques, 1994.

The main advantage that this population has obviously resides in the skills they have acquired. Most of them had had a previous migratory experience generally linked to their studies. If internal migration (which sixty-two persons in our sample had undertaken) or international migration (eight persons), or even both types (four persons) are taken into consideration, we can identify the existence of a mobility experience that would play an important role in these individuals' subsequent decision to emigrate and in the way they fared afterwards. There are even cases in which an entire family partook in the 'culture of mobility', with several members living in other countries or having spent significant time abroad.

Although these people generally arrived in France as international students, this was often a stepping stone to their entry into the labour market of the destination country. Meyer and Hernandez (2004) have observed that two thirds of R&D experts on the global level entered the destination country as students. As Steven Vertovec (2002)⁸ underlines, 'the experience of being a foreign student significantly increases the likelihood of being a skilled migrant at a later stage'. The networks developed by the students helped to provide opportunities for others from the country of origin.

4. Reasons for Departure and the Main Strategies Employed

The most important reason for departure seems to be the desire to pursue internationally recognised studies leading to the acquisition of an internationally recognised diploma. The second reason is the search for better job opportunities and the desire to acquire a better social status. These two reasons are not mutually exclusive, however; a diploma recognised all over the world seems to be the element facilitating the mobility. Once the diploma is acquired, graduates can go wherever they find the best job opportunities. Another element motivating departure is discontent with Romanian society; many feel that even though the communist regime is gone, the change in mentality has lagged behind. Some participants in our study said that they left in search of freedom, which they perceived as still difficult to find in Romanian society. At the same time, the desire to experience another culture also plays a significant part. Humankind's exploratory nature persists even in modern times.

Amongst the strategies employed to leave Romania, study abroad plays, as expected, the most important part. France is the country that receives the greatest number of Romanian students each year. In 2004, 4,839 Romanian students attended courses in French universities. Almost 70% of our sample population left the country as international students, whereas a few individuals left with a work contract (solely high tech professionals) or for the purpose of reuniting with family (in the case of women). Some of these strategies require a well-organised plan, for in order to become an international student, one needs to have very good marks and to work for them several years in advance.

Sometimes, the strategies foresaw a change of status after immigration, for example from international students to highly-skilled workers or from tourists to international students. The boundaries between the categories are fairly fluid, as one can very easily pass from one to another.

5. Destination Choice and Performance in the Labour Market

What determines the choice of the destination country? In the majority of cases, the decision seems to be shaped by the exchange programmes offered by the universities in the countries of origin and destination. Formal networks are the main channels of mobility for the highly-skilled, as described by Faist (1999).⁹ French 'soft power'¹⁰ also seems to play an important role, as knowledge of the French language and the

8 Vertovec, S. *Transnational Networks and Skilled Labour Migration. Ladenburger Diskurs 'Migration' Gottlieb Daimler- und Karl Benz-Stiftung. Ladenburg, 2002.*

9 Faist, T. *Transnationalization in international migration: Implications for the study of citizenship and culture. Oxford: ESRC Transnational Communities Programme Working Paper WPTC-99-14, 1999.*

10 Nye, J. S. *Soft power. The means to success in world politics. Cambridge MA: Perseus Books, 2004.*

allure of French culture together represent one of the most important elements spurring the choice to go to France. French soft power is very important in the Romanian case, as Romanian students began migrating to France at the end of the 18th century. This even became a tradition in the following century, when aristocratic families sent their children to be educated in France. Consequently, with respect to the history of French-Romanian relations, the exchange not only of people, but also of ideas, practices and symbols, should be emphasised. This flow was interrupted only by the communist period.

Another factor that seems to have influenced the choice of destination is the existence of informal networks of kin or friends. About a third of our sample cited the importance of informal networks in their choice of destination. The development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in recent years has facilitated contact within the networks, allowing for a virtual projection of the future space of mobility. Friends and kin already situated in the country of destination send information via virtual channels to future migrants in the home country. Moreover, migrants can do their own virtual search and gather information (including visual images) about their destinations. Migrants can in this way become accustomed to their future destination even before having physical contact with the place of destination. In other cases, due to the significant decrease in transportation costs, many migrants in our sample had already been to the destination country to visit relatives and friends. The visits paid as tourists were just a first step to becoming a migrant and were part of a learning process that was very important for the future mobility of the migrants.

Focusing this time on the destination country, we would like to know why these students stayed on once their study period had ended. Some of the respondents admitted that they stayed on in order to complete their qualification, whereas the majority felt that they would have better career opportunities if they stayed in France.

In the case of researchers, the lack of possibilities to conduct research at the international level in Romania and the low rate of investment in R&D both in the public and the private sectors seemed to encourage them to stay on in France. Returning to the home country was perceived as leading to brain waste.

For others, their decision to stay on was mainly due to changes that took place in their lives. Some of them built families in France; others simply felt that they had created their own lives there and that going back to Romania would mean having to start all over again.

How do these migrants fare in their destination country? At the professional level, the difficulties emerge with the passage from one status to another, for instance from international student to highly-skilled worker. Many of those in our sample admitted to having difficulties in finding a job commensurate with their qualifications. Their success also depended on their chosen professions and thus on labour market demand. If the economists and the high tech specialists seemed to face relatively fewer difficulties in finding a job, this was not the case for people with humanities degrees. Most of the migrants blamed this state of affairs on discrimination against foreigners in the French labour market. Indeed, the unemployment rate stood in 2002 at 5% for the natives, 7.2% for EU-15 nationals on the French labour market, 11% for foreigners having acquired French nationality and at 18% for foreigners coming from countries other than the EU-15, a rate almost three and a half times greater than in the case of the native-born population.¹¹

6. Multiple Allegiances and Identity

If professional integration can be difficult, what about social integration? Among the factors that can facilitate social integration are the acquisition of French citizenship (which ensures judicial rights equal to those enjoyed by the natives), knowledge of the French language, marriage to a French citizen, and kin and friendship networks, which can ease the immigrants' contact with the communities in which they find themselves. The most important part is played by the ties developed with colleagues at the university or at work; these people introduce the migrants to common practices and act as their best teachers.

11 Economic and Social Council, *L'Insertion des Jeunes d'Origine Etrangère*. 2002.

Upon analysing the interviews we conducted, we realised that the traditional discourse in terms of social integration, assimilation and identity no longer corresponds to these migrants' experiences, because they live in a world of multiple allegiances. These allegiances are to the home society, the destination society and, above all, to a multitude of communities.¹²

We indeed notice that these migrants develop competing but not exclusive attachments to more than one community at the same time. We can identify a wide range of communities to which these migrants belong: family communities, professional communities, student communities, ethnic communities, religious communities and political communities. These migrants are thus part of a range of overlapping communities both in real and symbolic terms. They can actually belong to more than one type of community, and even to more than one community of the same type. As Rainer Bauböck (2001) notes, 'Multiple citizenship is the most visible illustration of overlapping membership in political communities'.¹³

In these communities migrants very often develop ties that go beyond borders, thus creating a network culture, as most of them report having friends or relatives in other EU countries. Van Hear (1998) identifies three types of factors favouring the development of cross-border ties: communication facilities, transportation development and socio-cultural competences.¹⁴ According to Ascher (2006)¹⁵, 'these new social ties are probably weaker, less polyvalent, but a lot more numerous and changing: they grant mobility a new social status and allow individuals to lead a life of n dimensions.' These cross-border ties provide the migrants with access to information and events that occur in more than one place at the same time. The nature of these ties can be either virtual, in which case the contact inside the network occurs via the internet, or via mobile or fixed phones, or face to face. Virtual technology allows migrants can be present in several places at once. With the fall in transportation costs, migrants can easily circulate between the physical spaces that support the network. Identity itself is rebuilt inside these networks. Multiple allegiances to different communities are at the heart of the shift from a 'territorial identity to a network identity'.¹⁶ In this context, 'identity is also, inescapably, about displacement and relocation, the experience of sustaining and mediating complex affiliations, multiple attachments'.¹⁷ As a consequence, identities tend to be more situational. They are overlapping and flexible in order to allow individuals to adapt to their new mobility and to take advantage of the best opportunities they come across.

7. Contacts and Emergence of a Network Culture

Network expansion usually precedes territorial expansion. Within the network, material and immaterial flows circulate, ensuring the transmission of goods and services, as well as of social and economic information. The information received about better career opportunities often spurs the departure of migrants to another country. Social networks usually guide migrants into or through specific places and occupations. They are often crucial for finding jobs and housing.¹⁸ Multiple presences allow migrants to take advantage of better career opportunities no matter where these might turn up. Migrants do not circulate only between their home country and their destination country, but actually have multiple destinations. What determines their mobility is the search for a better social status and better career opportunities.

12 Kastoryano, R. Individus, communautés, états. Le cas des migrants de Turquie en Europe. *Cahiers d'étude sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde turco-iranien*, 1998.

13 Bauböck, R. Political community beyond the sovereign state: Supranational federalism and transnational minorities. In *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

14 Van Hear, N. *New Diasporas: the Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998.

15 Ascher, F. 'L'individu mobile dans une société hypermoderne' in *Mobilités.net*. Paris: L.G.D.J, 2006.

16 Badie, B. *La fin des territoires. Essai sur le désordre international et sur l'utilité sociale du respect*. Paris: Fayard, 1995.

17 Clifford, J. Mixed feelings. In *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, pp. 362–370.

18 Vertovec, S. Transnational Networks and Skilled Labour Migration. *Ladenburger Diskurs 'Migration' Gottlieb Daimler- und Karl Benz-Stiftung*. Ladenburg, 2002.

Should these opportunities arise in the home country, these migrants might return; if not, they are likely to choose another destination. With Romania's accession to the EU, some indeed seem convinced that better opportunities might surface in Romania. But even if they return home, they will no longer be confined to a certain space: they can go mobile again whenever they choose.

This space of flows is the source of their power, as it provides them with access to knowledge and information that are only available to individuals who are part of the network. We can actually identify the emergence of a network culture built by these migrants. This culture does not exclude friends and relatives who are still sedentary, however; differences between the different categories tend to fade away, and immobile individuals exposed to this network culture can easily become mobile. Conversely, mobile individuals can also choose to remain sedentary for a while. In this case, some specific effects for the country of origin come from the networks established with the migrants' families and friends but also with other professionals left behind. It is on these immaterial effects that we have chosen to focus on in our study. These long-distance networks can provide very important channels for flows of capital, skill and information.

In our study, we try to assess the level of contact with families and friends back in the home country. For almost 40% of the migrants, these contacts take place weekly. For almost 50%, these contacts are even more frequent, occurring daily or several times a week. The preferred means of communication is the telephone in about 45% of the cases and the internet in 32%. The rest of the migrants use both means at the same frequency. The telephone still remains the dominant means of communication despite the growth of the internet. This growth has resulted in the transformation of these 'objects of connection', i.e. the internet and the telephone, so that they have come to include each other's functions. The mobile phone allows one to connect to the internet, and the internet has spawned a line of services, like Skype and Messenger, with voice transmitting functions similar to those of the telephone. There is no clear distinction anymore between these objects, and by using one of them, the customer can actually be using the other at the same time.

The decrease in the price of communications allows migrants to maintain contact and actively take part in the real lives of those left behind. It is a way of living together and apart at the same time. The webcam attached to the computer makes face-to-face contact possible even in the case of virtual communication, reinforcing the impression of actual presence. Migrants are no longer absent from their space of origin, and their presence is ensured by the constant contact facilitated by the development of these means of communication. The eye is the 'most direct and purest interaction that exists'.¹⁹ It generates 'the most complete reciprocity; of person to person, face to face'. In this way, the eye intensifies the connection and interaction of individuals. At the same time, the increased accessibility and velocity of modern transportation facilitates 'real' contact, allowing migrants to come back to their home country several times a year and enabling their family and friends visit them in the destination country.

The flows of social capital determined by contact can be very important. Recent interviews conducted with the friends and families of the migrants brought us to the realisation that these flows lead to a learning process for those left in the home country. The mere existence of contact is not enough to guarantee the success of transfers. The family and friends back home need to have an absorption capacity allowing them to correctly decrypt the messages received. In order to facilitate contact and to ensure the accurate decryption of messages, family members have to take up practices they were not accustomed to before. Absence and presence can no longer be thought of as being in opposition, as migrants can nowadays be absent and present at the same time. Their presence is ensured by the development of network ties and the existence of contact – either virtual or real.

19 Simmel, G. *Simmel on Culture*. London: Sage, 1997.

8. Conclusions

The form of highly-skilled mobility that involves a lot of circulation between more than two countries can no longer be classified as brain drain. During the communist period, the highly-skilled migration from Romania could indeed be termed as brain drain, but nowadays, the strong ties with the home country and the development of contacts with the home society positively affecting its evolution renders the term brain drain obsolete. The networks that are developed ensure the flow of financial capital, knowledge and information. The individuals involved in these networks form the basis of a network culture that relies on both material and immaterial flows.

Romanian citizens abroad might actually play a very important part in the process of European integration, as integration means not only economic convergence but also convergence to the value system promoted by European countries. Through the immaterial flows that take place inside the networks, Romanian migrants can act as important catalysts for the transformation of Romanian society and for the convergence of Romanian values and lifestyles towards European values and lifestyles. This kind of convergence could be vital for Romanian society: informal institutions have been acknowledged to have played a major role in post-communist transition. The convergence of informal institutions seems to be in this case even more important than economic convergence. The persistence of behaviours inherited from the communist regime, like generalised corruption and clientelist networks, have constituted major drawbacks to the successful transformation of Romania. Without informal institutions that could legitimise and sustain economic reforms, economic convergence is unlikely to be achieved easily. When migration networks act in favour of this informal institutional convergence via flows, we consider this transformation to be a sort of transformation from below (imposed by migrants and their family and friends) and not something that is imposed by the Romanian state.