The Integration of Refugees in Romania:

A Non-Preferred Choice

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Abstract

Romania is currently experiencing an increase in the number of asylum seekers, but little is known about the care arrangements and state-supported integration programs in the country for people in need of international protection. This paper addresses this gap and adds to the scholarly literature on forced migration by examining how integration processes for asylum seekers are represented in the public service and political discourse. Using interview data (n =14) with Romanian bureaucrats and elected representatives in national, regional, and municipal offices, this paper explores the institutional capacity of the Romanian state to integrate refugees.

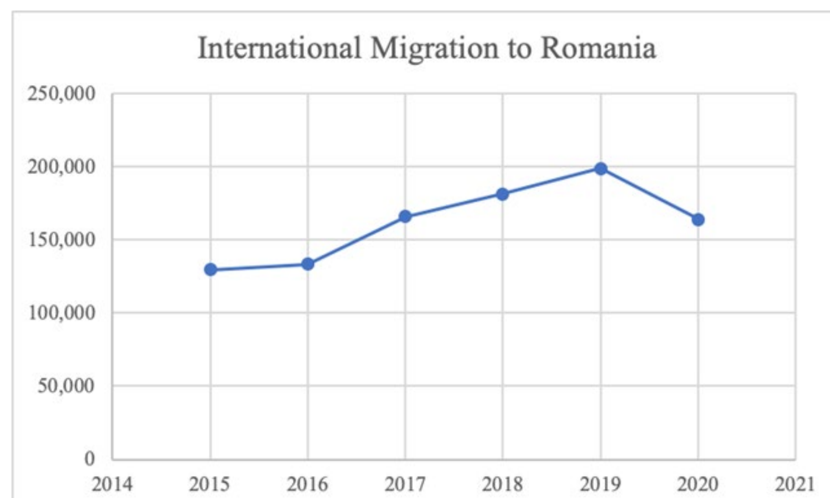
Introduction

Romania has long been an archetypal country of emigration. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the opening of the Eastern Bloc to capitalism, Romanian migrants have become a steady labour force in Western Europe. Italy hosts the largest Romanian diaspora, of about one million people (OECD, 2019a); there are also close to 900,000 Romanians living in Spain (Vlad, 2014) and just under half a million in the UK (Office of National Statistics, 2019). In all, it is estimated that close to 10 million Romanians are living abroad (Ministerul pentru Românii de Pretutindeni, 2019). However, there is no consensus on the exact figure; for instance, the National Ministry for Romanians from Abroad estimated this figure by adding to the 5.6 million Romanians residing in diaspora the numbers of those living in the so-called historical communities, that is, the neighbouring countries of Serbia, Moldova, and Ukraine (Ministerul pentru Românii de Pretutindeni, 2019). Arguably, those residing in neighbouring countries include many who have been resident there since before the end of the communist regime, as Romanians who left the country after the collapse of the communism are primarily living in Western Europe. Overall estimates indicate that approximately 20 percent of the national workforce is living abroad (Eurotopics, 2018). Indeed, it is said that Romania is experiencing a 'demographic catastrophe' (Turp-Balazs, 2018), having the second highest proportion in the world (after Syria) of citizens living abroad.

By contrast, immigration into Romania is relatively low. Until a decade ago, the foreign-born population consisted almost entirely of students attending medical school, and commercial entrepreneurs from Jordan, Iran, Egypt, and China who came in the wake of post-1989 legislation that was advantageous for foreign investment (Alexe and Păunescu, 2011). After joining the European Union (EU) in 2007, however, Romania started to see more inward migration, and between 2009 and 2019 the number of foreign-born residents increased by 278 percent (OECD, 2019b). Eurostat (2019) estimates that in 2019, 2 percent of the total population in Romania was foreign born, of which 38.2 percent were labour migrants, 26.6 percent family members, 25.3 percent international students, and 10 percent other migrants, generally workers on short-term contracts of less than one year (OECD, 2019b). The numbers from the Romanian National Institute of

Statistics, however, indicate that the proportion of foreign-born residents in the country sat close to 1 percent in 2019 (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2019). The discrepancies in numbers are most likely due to methodological considerations. Eurostat classifies a foreign-born subject as "a person whose place of birth, or residence of the mother at the time of the birth, is outside the country of his/her usual residence" (Eurostat, 2011), whereas the Romanian National Institute of Statistics classifies a subject of international migration as a person who migrated to Romania and has resided in the country for a minimum of twelve months (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2019). Regardless of differing methodological definitions, migration to Romania is undoubtedly on the rise (See Figure 1), with the most conservative estimates indicating a doubling from 0.65 percent of the general resident population in 2015 to over 1.02 percent in 2019. The 2020 figures indicate a slight decrease, but this was most likely due to travel restrictions implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1. International Migration to Romania, 2015–2020

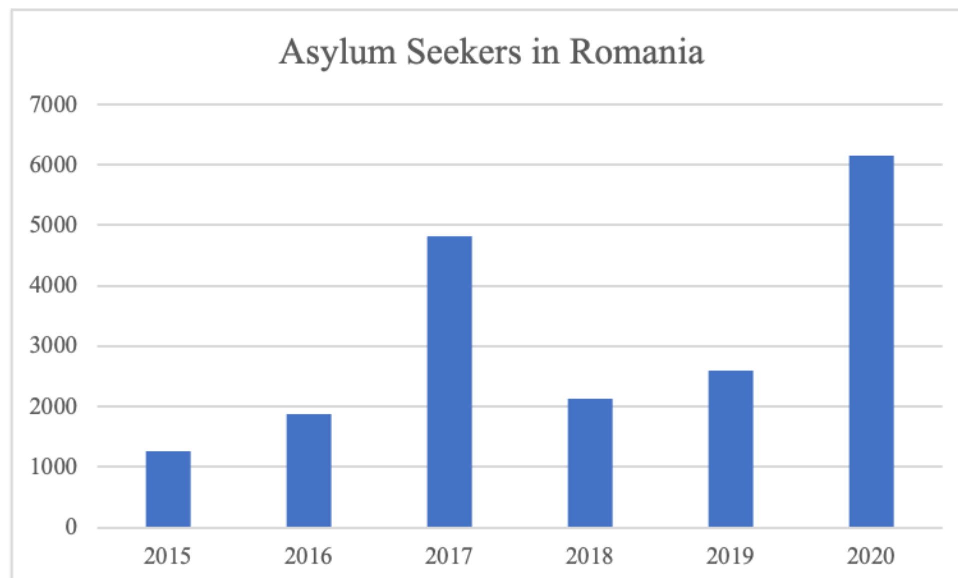


Source: The Romanian National Institute of Statistics

Some migrants in Romania are people in need of international protection and are recipients of subsidiary protection. However, their numbers are not captured in national migration statistics, since most asylum seekers are not counted under the foreign-born classification until they receive a decision on their asylum claim and/or are granted permanent residence.

In the last five years, the number of asylum applications in Romania increased six fold, from 1,260 in 2016 to over 6,000 in 2020 (see Figure 2). Until 2018, the main countries of origin for asylum seekers in Romania were Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Algeria (Eurostat, 2018a). By 2020, the countries of citizenship of the five largest groups of first-time asylum applicants in Romania were Afghanistan (2,365), Syria (1,420), Iraq (395), Turkey (360), and Morocco (230) (European Commission, 2021).

Figure 2. Asylum Seekers Arriving in Romania, 2015–2020



Source: European Parliament

Between 2015 and 2017, Romania also received 728 refugees through the EU relocation mechanism. This was a scheme adopted by the EU in 2015 for transferring 120,000 people from Italy and Greece – the 'burdened' front-line nations of the Mediterranean – to other EU Member States. The relocations were distributed over a two-year period, and the number of refugees to be received by each country was determined by an equalizing formula based on a weighting of four national indicators: GDP (40%), population size (40%), unemployment rate (10%), and the number of previously received asylum applications (10%) (European Commission, 2015). Prior to the scheme's adoption, the Romanian government voted against it, criticizing it for addressing only the symptoms of the problem and disregarding the structural causes that produced the refugee crisis (Bejan, 2017). However, Romania ultimately signed on to the agreement, and committed to

receiving 4,946 relocations (European Commission, 2015); though in the end only 728 people were relocated to the country. Government stakeholders deemed the scheme ineffective, since it did not include country-specific indicators and failed to consider the preferences of the refugees on where they were to be relocated (Bejan, 2020).

A small number of refugees enter Romania through resettlement, by which those registered with UNHCR for international protection are transferred to EU territory. Resettlement refers to the transfer of non-EU/stateless persons to an EU state, whereas relocation refers to the transfer of persons already in Europe to another member state. The resettlement quotas in Romania are low, generally around forty people a year. To date, Romania resettled thirty-eight Myanmar refugees from Malaysia in 2010; forty Iraqis from Turkey in 2014; and sixty individuals from Middle East and North Africa in 2016 and 2017 (UNHCR, 2016). The resettlement of 109 Syrian refugees from Turkey and Jordan, representing the 2018–2019 quota, was carried out in 2019 and 2020 (IOM Romania, 2020).

The increased numbers of asylum seekers in Romania, although lower than those in most Western European states, reflect the fact that the country has become a key entry point to Europe on the Balkan route. Just over 46,000 irregular migrants, the majority of whom were Afghans (30.6%) and Syrians (28.5%), tried to cross the Romanian border in 2020, approximately four times more than in 2019, when this figure sat at just over 10,000. Out of those 46,000, close to 35,000 were barred from entering, just over 10,000 were caught while crossing, and 3,641 claimed asylum at the border (Poliţia de Frontieră Română, 2021).

Despite increased numbers, there is both a lack of literature on how refugees are faring in Romania, and a lack of understanding among scholars, policy makers, and other community stakeholders about asylum care arrangements and the state-supported integration programs in the country. Integration generally refers to the multidimensional and interrelated processes that facilitate the incorporation of migrants into the social fabric of the host society, increasing migrants' access to opportunities similar to those of the native-born population while also affecting the national fabric in the host societies (Codini and D'Odorico, 2014; Kierans,

2021; Paraschivescu, 2011; Shields and Bauder; 2015, Spencer, 2018). Among the dimensions of integration that affect one's life trajectory in a new society are economic sufficiency, sociocultural adaptation in terms of institutional participation, strong social networks, access to health care, social services, and housing, engagement in social, civic, and political life, attachment to national identity, and a sense of belonging (Bejan, 2011; Sakamoto et al., 2010; Shields and Bauder, 2015). These processes are perhaps even more important for refugees, who often struggle to start a new life abroad; for instance, while labour market participation has been found to improve economic independence and boost relationships in the community, asylum seekers are often prohibited from participating in full employment (Kierans, 2021).

In the few instances where integration is discussed in the literature on Romania, scholars are preoccupied with drawing a definition of the concept in general terms and only tangentially in relation to Romania (Cârciumaru and Chipea, 2020), with developing conceptual frameworks for measuring integration (Coșciug, 2018), or with discussing integration outcomes loosely taken as 'immigrant'-specific and not necessarily 'refugee'-specific. Various classes of migrants – EU citizens, those coming from third countries outside the EU for family reunification or work, and refugee claimants – are often lumped together under the label 'immigrant', with a particular emphasis on the integration of skilled immigrant workers into the Romanian labour market (Coșciug et al., 2019). A specific focus on the integration of humanitarian migrants is lacking.

Romania was under a Communist regime for over fifty years. Seeking asylum was not a common process in the country and the national migration governance structure only started to develop after the 1989 revolution. Simply put, Romania does not have the same governance structures that have existed in Western democracies since the development of their welfare states. This is not to imply that migration governance provisions in Western Europe are de facto better than those ought to be developed in the Eastern Bloc, but is only to suggest that the integration of refugees in Romania is bound to look slightly different in comparison to countries that have had years to perfect their immigrant settlement mechanisms or have adopted multiculturalism as official state

policy. It is important to note also that the integration of asylum seekers is asymmetrical to that of skilled migrants, despite the fact that both classes of migrants are grouped together in Romanian scholarly literature. Skilled migrants have secure immigration status in the host society, a set of guaranteed civil and legal rights that come attached with permanent residency, and access to citizenship, whereas asylum seekers remain in an insecure status until the decision on their claim is finalized, and lack the rights and entitlements attached to permanent residency.

It is from within this context that the present paper unpacks the integration processes of refugees in Romania and the outcomes of such processes as they are represented in the public service and political discourse, in a country where such issues have been less studied. There is little information available about how asylum recipients are faring in Romania, since the state lacks a systematic procedure for collecting research and evaluation data on integration outcomes (Bejan, 2020). In particular, Romanian scholars have drawn attention to the fact that processes of integration are limited to procedural guidelines that technically comply with the European normative framework but fail to reflect the societal-individual dynamics required for successful integration (Porumbescu, 2019).

The scholarly literature has always struggled to define a common measure of integration that could be universally applied, both theoretically and empirically, across the different socio-political, economic, and cultural dimensions that determine the inclusion and exclusion of migrants in societies. Some scholars have written that the psychological, economic, political, social and linguistic dimensions of integration can be applied to all migrant groups – not just skilled migrants but also refugees and asylum seekers (Harder et al., 2018). Recent conceptual work is reacting to criticisms of normativity, methodological nationalism, and the objectification of the other, in defining the engagement between migrants and their host society in terms of structural integration (i.e., participation in the labour market, the housing market, and education); social (i.e., relationships); cultural (i.e., attitudes and lifestyle); civic and political participation (i.e., community life) and identity (i.e., sense of belonging with the nation) (Spencer and Charsley, 2021). This paper contributes to the literature on integration in Romania by tracking the aspects of what Spencer and Charsley (2021) have called

'structural integration', but is focused on one specific subgroup of migrants in Romania, namely, asylum seekers.

Migration governance in Romania

As a signatory to the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1951 (UNHCR, 1966), Romania adheres to international standards outlining refugee rights, in terms of granting asylum as well as the fundamental rights that applicants are entailed to claim. Asylum procedures are stipulated in Law 122, the National Asylum Law, which was adopted on 4 May 2006 (Parliament of Romania, 2006). Law 122 specifies that asylum claims can be initiated either on Romanian territory or at the border, verbally or in writing. Claims are generally processed by the General Inspectorate for Immigration (IGI), which functions under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior (MAI) or associated agencies such as the Romanian Office for Immigration (and its territorial offices), the Romanian Border Police, the Romanian Police, and the National Administration for Penitentiaries within the Ministry of Justice (Parliament of Romania, 2006). Migration management in Romania is fairly centralized, which is why the IGI is the main state agency that oversees all migration matters in the country from integration services to border control and asylum-related procedures. Romania does not have the multi-layered migration management approaches at the national, regional, and municipal levels that exist in Western Europe (Bejan, 2020). In a multidimensional migration governance approach, there is a plurality of state and non-state actors addressing migrant needs and sustaining wide-ranging efforts of solidarity and cooperation (Panebianco, 2021). Networks of international organizations, local NGOs, and grassroots solidarity initiatives often coordinate integration processes for the refugee population, alongside governmental measures. The non-governmental provision of relief alongside state governance often generates parallel systems of coordinating local and national migration policies (Parsanoglou, 2020; Papada et al., 2020). In Romania, by contrast, migration governance is coordinated solely under the auspices of the state. The few civil society actors present in the country do not influence top-level state decisions on migration policies, nor do they have a strong say in the implementation of

the asylum regime. It is the state alone that dictates how migration management gets structured in the country (Bejan, 2020).

There are two procedures in place for claiming asylum in Romania. Through the regular process, the asylum request is analyzed directly by IGI; through the judicial procedure, any negative decisions on the claim can be contested in the courts (Trifu, 2016). Law 122 stipulates that asylum procedures be applied without discrimination based on race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, social class, sex and sexual orientation, or disability and health status (Parliament of Romania, 2006). While asylum applications are assessed on an individual basis, most applications deemed unfounded are those originating from so-called safe countries of origins. The safe countries are defined in consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Parliament of Romania, 2006), usually on the basis of the number of claims originating from the country and general evidence of human rights protections, political pluralism, free elections, and democratic institutions (Parliament of Romania, 2006).

Executive Order 44, issued in 2004, governs integration of asylum seekers (Parliament of Romania, 2004). This order is meant to facilitate the social integration in Romanian society of those who have received a recognized form of protection, but also applies to other legal residents in Romania (e.g., foreign nationals), by stipulating their rights: access to employment, social assistance, social housing, medical care, and the public pension system in the same way as for Romanian citizens, as well as to free primary and secondary education for minors who have received protection (Parliament of Romania, 2004). Once asylum or subsidiary protection is granted, each person is included in a one-year-long integration program developed by the IGI. At request, this program can extend by six months (Parliament of Romania, 2004). The aim is to assist newcomers in the transition to full participation in Romanian society, through Romanian language courses, housing assistance for up to twelve months at accommodation centres and up to 50 percent of the market rent for an additional year, cultural accommodation sessions, psychological counselling, and material aid for up to one year, on condition of participation in the program (NiCER n.d.).

Reception and integration services for people in need of international protection are provided through six regional emergency centres set up by IGI in Bucharest and the adjacent cities of Şomcuta Mare, Rădăuţi, Galaţi, Timişoara, and Giurgiu. These centres process applications and assist with service delivery to asylum seekers, offering medical care, financial and legal assistance, support with ID processing, and employment assistance. The total capacity of the centres sits at 900 places: 320 in Bucharest, 200 in Galați, 130 in Rădăuţi, 100 in Giurgiu and Şomcuta Mare, and 50 in Timişoara (Nicolescu, 2019). The IGI plans to increase the capacity in some of these centres by a couple hundred in the coming years (Nicolescu, 2019). Integration-only centres, set up under the IGI's Asylum and Integration Directorate, are located in the largest cities in Romania: Cluj-Napoca, Baia Mare, Sibiu, Târgu Mures, Bucharest, Craiova, Brașov, Pitești, Iasi, Constanța, Galați, and Vaslui (NiCER, n.d.).

Integration programs have recently started to be administered by some of the major NGOs in the country, such as the National Romanian Council for Refugees (CNRR), the Ecumenical Association of Churches in Romania, the Jesuits Refugee Service, and the International Organization for Migration Romania. The CNRR is also actively involved in advocacy efforts to reduce barriers to integration by increasing public awareness, and by outlining the contributions of refugees to their host societies (CNRR, 2020). The work of these NGOs was made possible with resources from the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), which set up a three-billion-euro budget for programming across Europe. Projects funded through the AMIF in Romania include those related to the delivery of social, legal, counselling, and other migration assistance services to asylum seekers (IGI, 2021). Alongside the NGOs mentioned above, smaller organizations, such as the Romanian Forum for Refugees and Migrants (ARCA), World Vision Romania, the ICAR Foundation, LADO Cluj (the League for Defending Human Rights) and the Romanian Association for Health Promotion, have implemented AMIF-funded projects for the integration of refugees.

Methodology

Qualitative data, consisting of fourteen semi-structured interviews, were collected to explore how politicians and bureaucrats working in migration-related governmental agencies in Romania interpret the notion of refugee integration. Guest et al. (2006) have demonstrated that thirteen to fifteen interviews achieve theoretical saturation in qualitative research, supporting the sample size for this participant group. Interviews were conducted in the spring of 2019 in Bucharest and Galați, Romania. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Transcripts were manually coded for emergent themes and subthemes relating to the topic of refugee integration in Romania.

The sample included nine elected representatives and five public servants. Ten participants identified as male and four as female. Ages ranged from 33 to 65 years. The majority of the participants were ethnic Romanians, with only one person of mixed Roma and Romanian origin. The bureaucrats were mainly ministerial advisors affiliated with IGI's Directorate for Asylum and Integration or the Department for Integration and Relocation, and thus with the MAI. Most public service employees had close to twenty years of experience working for IGI. The politicians included in the sample were current members of the Romanian Parliament, former or current members of the European Parliament, and elected representatives in regional county and municipal councils, primarily affiliated with the Social Democratic Party (PSD), which was in power at the time. Those in the Romanian Parliament were former or current members of the Parliamentary Committee for European Affairs, the Human Rights Committee, the Labour Committee, or the National Council for Combatting Discrimination. Participants were asked to discuss the country's migration profile, estimated refugee figures, the demographic composition of the refugee population, and the state's capacity for service delivery and the integration of refugees into Romanian society, as it relates to access to education, health care, housing, and the labour market.

Results

The coordination of asylum in Romania

Participants indicated that all six asylum emergency centres are centrally managed from Bucharest with occupancy decided from the capital according to the number of free spots and the claimants' family circumstances:

> *"After the applications are reviewed, they are selected based on families, people who know each other, because there's no point in separating groups. If we have, for example, a minor and a brother, or a minor and an uncle, or a relative, you automatically keep them within the same group. Families, husband, wife, two kids, that's a group … you cannot break them up. And based on available spots that's how they are directed, as soon as they land at the airport at Otopeni."* (Bureaucrat, Galați)

The reception centre in Giurgiu was the last one opened, in 2011, in response to the Arab Spring. Bureaucrats indicated that it hosts mainly single men. A seventh reception centre is planned for Crevidia, in Ilfov County, but is still being assessed for feasibility by IGI. No central budget is yet allocated for Crevidia, as funding would be provided from the EU. Participants stated that each of the six centres is fully equipped to support the well-being of the claimants, with professional staff on site providing medical, mental health, and translation assistance.

These reception centres also host those whose claims have been rejected and are about to be deported, those who did not respect their voluntary exit decisions, or those who had been in trouble with the law in other ways. Participants indicated that those waiting to leave receive a deportation letter (also called a 'decision to return'). The letter indicates a deadline for departure of either fifteen or thirty days; those asking for voluntary repatriation have a deadline of thirty days. Only Syrian refugees are exempt from this protocol:

> *"Syrian citizens are tolerated on Romanian territory. If they are identified as illegal, we tolerate them until the conflict ends in the area."* (Bureaucrat, Galați)

Asked about capacity, participants indicated that a decade earlier, reception centres in Romania had been running at 20 percent capacity; in 2015, at the peak of the refugee crisis in Europe, they were at 100 percent capacity; and in 2019, at the time of the current study, their occupancy was sitting at 50 percent. Bureaucrats indicated that IGI intended in the coming years to expand the hosting capacity of the reception centres in anticipation of higher inflows.

Participants considered the asylum system in Romania much simpler in comparison to Western Europe. Whereas asylum seekers in Greece and Italy would have to wait several months, or even years, for their claims to be heard, in Romania requests would be processed in two to three months. The identification of claimants was seen as the most difficult part of the procedure:

> *"If each of them would come with their passport in hand, it would be super simple. But all of them either give you different names, or they forget a name or they mix up letters. And it's hard for you to know who you're talking to … to identify them in order to start the procedure."* (Bureaucrat, Galați)

Asked about the role of the MAI and why the IGI is placed administratively under the MAI, participants stated that this organization is simply a relic of the Communist regime and has persisted simply through bureaucratic inertia. The IGI came into existence in 2007, after Romania joined the EU, through the amalgamation of two entities that had initially been created after the fall of the communist regime: The National Office of Refugees, which was set up in 1999 to oversee irregular migration, and the National Authority of Foreigners/ Directorate for Foreigners, which was set up in 1996 to oversee regular migration.

‘Everyone wants to integrate them’: State and civil society provisions

Most interview subjects stated that refugees had access to institutional support for settlement. The integration programs in Romania are delivered through a national network of integration centres, which have been set up by the IGI with AMIF support. These centres are located in most cities, while the smaller towns host equivalent facilities called ‘work points’. Participants stated that these centres and work points do not serve only those that benefit from protection in Romania but also any other foreign citizens that have residency rights and may require assistance with language acquisition or access to the labour market.

Asked about the state-supported integration process, participants said that this is provided for a one-year period. During this time, each refugee has their own individual integration plan drafted by the IGI. Those who are participating in an integration program receive free housing at one of the IGI centres and have access to the labour market, free medical care, cultural activities, and psychological assistance. A monthly allowance of 540 RON (the Romanian currency) is provided, conditional on participation in integration-specific activities, such as Romanian language courses, cultural accommodation workshops, psychological counselling, and enrolment in job-seeking programs. Complementary to the state-supported activities, services are delivered through NGOs with funds from the AMIF, in the form of housing support and financial assistance for utilities and rent for one year. AMIF resources are also used for the provision of custom language textbooks at various proficiency levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Bureaucrats stated that the Romanian language classes provided through the Ministry of Education are offered in every county hosting an asylum centre, two to three times a week, depending on the group size. Classes are conducted through the regional educational inspectorates for up to a year as part of a preparatory course in the Romanian language. Initially, the language modules were not mandatory, but low demand, and hence fluctuating class size, seem to have prompted the state to mandate them, so that at the end of the one-year integration phase asylum seekers will have at least a minimal understanding of the Romanian language. If few

people are enrolled, or the integration centres serve underpopulated areas and the state is unable to provide language courses, NGOs fill this gap. Minors also take part in the language preparatory course, and at the end of the year they are enrolled in compulsory schooling, which, as participants emphasized, is provided free of charge, as it is to Romanian citizens. Participants also emphasized that IGI intends to increase funding for language classes beyond those provided through the school inspectorates. It was mentioned that in some cases refugees enrolled in the local university, in Galați, for example.

Access to health care is free, including for emergency assistance, but after the 'integration year' refugees pay for medical insurance – like Romanian citizens, as was emphasized by some interview subjects. If a person under international protection is employed, the employer pays medical insurance through taxes.

Once claimants are granted refugee status, generally after three months, they are registered as jobseekers and have access to the same employment opportunities as Romanian nationals. Assistance is provided to identify workplaces compatible with the skills of each person. Participants considered Romania to have one of the shortest wait times in the EU with regard to access to the workforce, at ninety days from when one applies for asylum. Each county in Romania has a workforce-placing agency where protected refugees can register as jobseekers. However, participants stated that the interval between claiming asylum and beginning to look for work is too short for the refugees to acquire the education and qualifications necessary for them to integrate into the labour market.

About a quarter of the refugee population in Romania is integrated into local workforces, according to the interview participants. Refugees need to present documentation from their hosting asylum centre to the prospective employer in order to facilitate hiring. This documentation, which includes the personal data of the asylum claimant, was considered necessary by participants, especially since most claimants do not have identification, having declared their identity only verbally when seeking asylum. Until confirmation of identity, which can take weeks or even months, recognized refugees use the documentation provided by the asylum centre. According

to the participants, political efforts are underway to change the legislation that requires the certification of educational credentials (i.e., official transcripts) as a prerequisite for accessing the labour market, since most people in need of international protection arrive in the country without certification.

Out of those successfully employed, there have been no reported problems, according to the bureaucrats, with both employers and refugees being content with the working arrangements.

> *"All of them are received very well. At their jobs, when they go, there are no problems … They integrate very well. Now it also depends on the chemistry of each person and how they interact with the citizens."* (Bureaucrat, Galați)

Some interview subjects stated that successful employment arrangements were the exception but were used as examples for media consumption. According to them, most refugees were jobless. Not knowing the language meant they could not work, nor could they easily find a job. Added to the mix were the cultural differences in the workforce and the fact that they were kept under surveillance in specialized centres until their identity could be established.

Some participants asserted that refugees are well assisted by the state in comparison with Romanian citizens. For example, some emphasized that the monthly assistance of 540 RON can be higher than an old-age pension, which can be as little as 30 to 50 RON a month. Others stated that before integrating migrants, Romania needs to solve its own socio-economic disparities, in terms of the underemployment and unemployment of the local population.

Asked about possible discrimination on the part of employers, participants implied that refugees have equal rights with the Romanians. They disputed any evidence of prejudicial treatment, and attributed bad outcomes in employment to the refugees themselves not wanting to do the work or not having the 'desire to integrate':

> *“Integration is a bidirectional process […] because it has to come from both sides. We need to facilitate it, but the person has to want to integrate in society. Otherwise, this thing is not possible.”* (Bureaucrat, Bucharest)

> *“You know how it is. I give you money. It depends on what you want to do with it. Or I offer you services, a Romanian language course, free healthcare, uhm … at the employment assistance office you are enrolled to search for a job … but one’s desire for a job must also come. There were people … and not just a few, quite many in fact, who refused to work because … . Syria at one point, and most people who came to Romania are Syrians … Syria was a prosperous country with a high standard of living … Maybe a standard of living higher than Romania. It is quite difficult to come to Romania as a refugee and to want to be the same. No, it’s another start, you have to start again to build things. And that is why some refuse to work. To work for a Romanian employer, it might seem humiliating.”* (Bureaucrat, Bucharest)

Participants also resorted to the typical scapegoating discourses that are common in any nation settling migrants: the provision of assistance gives little incentive to work since people are content to get by on limited state provisions. Others referred to the employment of refugees in the Southern European states, Italy for example, in the service and tourism industry, emphasizing that it is difficult to integrate them because they are not ‘model employees’.

Participants also referenced the presence of students from Africa and Asia in Romania as an example of diversity in the country, hence of a presumed lack of societal discrimination.

Some interview participants expressed the view that integration benefits not only the migrants themselves but also the host society. Such rhetoric was framed on the contribution that migrants could potentially make based on the human and social capital that they bring to the labour market. Skilled migrants and those with skills in industries lacking personnel (e.g., construction) were preferred, and were seen as bringing down the costs of

their integration with better results at the end of their integration process. Such arrangements seemed beneficial for all parties. Integration then becomes a matter of satisfying the labour needs of the host society:

> *"Some plans and integration measures [are needed] but I repeat, channelled towards the integration not necessarily in society, but finding a job and entering a production form, to justify your presence, as well as the state aid, I say it is necessary. If it happens in one year, in two, in three … things should also start from this. Beyond these theories of the gene mix and diversity. And then you live alongside the locals, and put your shoulder to work and produce […]. You will certainly be able to afford more! A better school for the child, maybe a house or an apartment."* (Local politician, Galați)

Despite ample discussion of various aspects of integration, participants seemed to equate integration with the initial reception. Integration was loosely described as the provision of decent living conditions in the asylum centres – food, shelter, education:

> *"They have […] an appropriate shelter, with linens, with a fridge, so they can eat there, they have a certain daily allowance, they buy their own stuff. As I was telling you, they have Romanian language teachers … they are well assimilated."* (Local politician, Galați)

If people were taking language classes and had access to community places, they were seen as integrated in society:

> *"There are courses, Romanian language, so the integration in the society is done […] in a scientific way, in terms of steps. […] They have access to all the facilities that can be provided by both the government and the city, without any restriction."* (Local politician, Galați)

Overall, the state-supported integration program was seen as a limited yet functional system. Participants stated that official data showed the success of refugee integration into Romanian society for those that followed the institutional path offered by the Romanian state.

Integration in Romania, a non-preferred choice

Participants felt that most refugees do not want to settle in Romania. The country is seen as merely a transit route to Western Europe:

> *"Romania is not marketable. At the moment, we're still a transit country because that's all we have to offer, you can't compare yourself with the big states."* (Bureaucrat, Bucharest)

> *"Romania is not a preferred destination country. Migrants want to go to other destinations. It was also a cartoon in the press at one point, with a migrant, I do not know from what area, from Asia … a Muslim … who entered Romania by mistake and cried."* (Member of Parliament, Bucharest)

According to the participants, most asylum seekers want to settle in the Scandinavian countries, states with stronger social welfare systems, developed economies, and generous benefit programs. Financial incentives were primarily driving the choice of seeking asylum in Western Europe:

> *"If Romania offers 400 euros and Denmark offers 2000, of course all of them will go to Denmark."* (Bureaucrat, Galați)

Regarding the relocation process, participants stated that Romania was willing to settle refugees to meet its legal commitments as set in the relocation decisions adopted by the EU Commission in 2015, and that so far the Romanian state had not rejected anyone who had entered the country through relocation. The problem seems to have been the lack of requests or the refugees' refusal to come to Romania.

It appears that some discriminatory attitudes played a part in the relocation selection procedures, as participants made implicit references to the Cologne attacks in Germany where, so it was alleged in the broader media, a large group of Arab and North African young men assaulted multiple women (BBC, 2016). However, commentaries were vague in this regard and it is unclear how discriminatory attitudes surfaced in practice, since no actual relocations have been rejected:

> *"It is true that we, as a state, had some criteria to consider. I mean the idea is not to take someone by force and bring that person somewhere … because it is still a human being that we are taking and one needs to pay attention to their values and to what that person wants. And then we followed family criteria, as the family constitutes a strong bond … but then this process also coincided with the phenomena and what happened in Germany. And then we had to be very careful in their selection."* (Bureaucrat, Bucharest)

Two Members of Parliament expressed concerns about terrorism and used such presumptions to advocate for strong border controls. Terrorist attacks that had taken place in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016, were mentioned, along with concerns that potential aggressors could enter the EU through the Mediterranean migration routes. Border enforcement was seen as an example of Romania doing its part in protecting European territory, and thus sharing in the responsibility for asylum matters along with other Member States. Some referred to the 'terrorist' theme as politically manipulated by both sides of the political spectrum:

> *"Those that support migration don't mention it, for instance if there is a terrorist attack they don't mention the attacker's religion or his origin, not to make it look bad. While those against migrants highlight that he was a Muslim, a refugee and so on, and many times the information is manipulated, based on how it benefits. But it is a reality you can't look away from, that among the Muslim migrants there are some that have been radicalized. There have been terrorist attacks, it is a reality, we can't deny it. There are also white Christians that commit terrorist attacks and this is also a reality."* (Bureaucrat, Bucharest)

While participants embraced border control measures, concerns were expressed about the EU doing little to change the structural causes that are forcing people to leave their country, such as poverty or war. Europe should also focus on solving the conflict in the Middle East, some argued, so people would not be forced to flee their homes:

> *"The migration that hit Europe is determined by the civil war in Syria and everybody looks the other way pretending they don't see the causes. And in fixing the problem we are dealing with the effects. Migration is an effect but the cause is the civil war. A responsible policy would be settling the conflicts outside Europe and automatically this humanitarian migration would drop. There is the other migration, for economic reasons. And here, a good policy would be to have economic partnerships that can make life in Maghreb or in the Middle East or Africa bearable. Poverty is an important cause of migration."* (Bureaucrat, Bucharest)

Once the relocation scheme halted, Romania continued its efforts with what the participants called the 'external relocation' process ('resettlement' in the jargon of migration governance).

While most participants emphasized the drawbacks of settling in Romania, the country was still seen as accommodating and overall as a better choice than the containment camps in the Mediterranean:

> *"This is how I see it: rather than staying in a tent with five hundred people for each hundred square metres, I think it's better to stay with your family in a room with TV, with decent living conditions."* (Bureaucrat, Galați)

> *"I was talking to a migrant, about a year ago, who was telling me that she wanted to cross from Serbia. She was now in Romania [...], living in an asylum centre ... and I was with the UN High Commission doing a check, and she was saying that she tried to cross into Hungary thirteen times. She's been caught thirteen times and sent back ... and in Romania she managed to enter the second time she tried."* (Bureaucrat, Bucharest)

A paradox surfaced in the interviews. On the one hand, participants referred to Romania as a country that provides strong integration support for the refugee population; on the other hand, participants stated that Romania has limited experience in the field of asylum and lacks the solid integration schemes that have been present in the West for decades:

> *"Think about the migration structure in Romania. We are few ... only in Berlin there are ... how many ... several hundred people who work in this structure. We only have a few hundred, and this at the national level."* (Bureaucrat, Bucharest)

The suggestions provided by the participants for improving the asylum system in Romania were generally: creating additional reception centres, employing more workers in these centres, establishing stronger state-NGO links, and informing the general population about the beneficial outcomes that the integration of refugees can have for both the host society and the people in need of international protection.

Analysis and discussion

The idea of integration, of what structural integration entails, in terms of economic participation, education and training, but also in terms of participation in the community life, is not well understood in the Romanian political and public service discourse. Bureaucrats in particular, compared to the elected representatives, tended to equate integration with the existence of asylum reception centres. But merely having asylum emergency centres is not equivalent to the processes that encompass integration, which are concerned with increasing migrants' access to opportunities similar to those of the native population: participation in educational and cultural institutions, the political system, and the labour market, adherence to national values, and political and electoral representation (Kierans, 2021; Codini and D'Odorico, 2014; Paraschivescu, 2011). Although there was an awareness that migration cuts across many policy fields and that public policy in various domains, from labour to health and social assistance, impacts the integration processes of newcomers to the country, participants tended to see the processes of integration in Romanian society as reducible to first-response experiences. As one public servant put it: 'What we specifically do is to manage the right of residence.' Supporting the integration of migrants was seen as secondary to reception.

Participants repeatedly stated that recognized refugees have access to the same employment and job protections as any Romanian. However, needing to show employers documentation from the asylum centre, and having

employers identify one's refugee status in a country that is not particularly diverse, will most likely lead to differential labour relationships between asylum seekers and the national population. Labour market discrepancies between immigrant and national populations have been well documented in the literature. Most research shows the unemployment and underemployment rates of new immigrants to be higher than those of the native population, and these figures are observed even in countries with already-implemented multicultural policies that are actively recruiting migrants and have comprehensive migrant integration schemes (Bejan, 2011; Alba and Foner, 2015). In the UK, for instance, close to 15 percent of immigrant workers are found in low-skill jobs, despite being overqualified for them, compared to 9 percent of the UK-born population (Kierans, 2021); moreover, those seeking asylum are more likely to be unemployed than those who moved for reasons of skilled employment, education, or family reunification (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo, 2021). In fact, 'ethnic penalties' of newly arrived immigrants have been documented across various European national labour markets, such as Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands as they relate to unemployment and in Italy and Spain as they relate to underemployment (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011). In Romania, in a national survey of 645 foreign-born residents, 20 percent of the respondents indicated they felt discriminated against in restaurants and bars, 19 percent in relation to local authorities and access to educational institutions, 18 percent in relation to public transport, and 17 percent when seeking employment (Coșciug et al., 2019). Of note, the immigrants who took part in this survey were for the most part highly skilled. For the refugee population, labour market discrepancies and discrimination in society would no doubt be even greater.

Over qualification, job insecurity, and lower salaries: These factors characterize any immigrant's standing in the labour market. However, the interview participants in this sample seemed unaware of such issues, despite the fact that access to the labour market has been identified as a challenge for refugees in all Eastern European countries, including Romania (UNHCR, 2011). For instance, the refugees from Myanmar resettled in Galați in 2010 stated that they could not even afford basic needs such as diapers for their children, and that their socio-economic situation in Romania was much worse than it had been when they were in Malaysia (UNHCR, 2011).

Poorer outcomes for immigrants than for Romanian citizens are likely to be exacerbated by the already low standard of living in the country. More than a decade after it joined the EU, Romania continues to have a living standard well below the European average (Bejan, Iorga-Curpan and Amza, 2017). In 2015, the minimum wage in Romania was 218 euros per month (Eurostat, 2015) which increased to 408 euros by 2018 (Eurostat, 2018b) and 466 euros by 2020 (Eurostat, 2021). Compare this to Netherlands, which had a minimum wage set at 1,636 euros for 2020, Germany at 1,584 euros or France at 1,539 euros (Eurostat, 2020). The current minimum wage for Romania, while it registered one of the largest increases in the EU, is still half of the average minimum wage across the EU, which in 2020 was 962 euros per month (Eurostat, 2020).

The fact that the interviewees think that refugees do not want to work because they receive assistance with food and shelter from the Romanian state is a surprising idea to be expressed by public servants, themselves employed by the state. Participants ignored the fact that support for living costs is provided to those in need of international protection only until the end of their asylum procedure. Once their cases are finalized, successful claimants must leave the asylum centre, find a place to live in the private housing market, learn the language, and put their children in school. State assistance is not of indefinite duration, but participants spoke as if that source of support would be available to refugees for years to come.

In stating that access to education, health care, and the labour market is the same for the Romanian population as for refugees, participants were engaging in an 'us versus them' reasoning. The claim that the two populations have equal access – a claim based on the supposition that national subjects should have prioritized access because they are, well, national – implies that refugees are dealt a better hand than Romanians are. While this was not directly stated, some expressed this perceived preferential treatment for the refugees indirectly (e.g., 'As Romanians we don't get any help'). In suggesting that refugee claimants have the same economic rights as national subjects, participants ignored that classes of people have been differentiated on the basis of citizenship ever since the rise of the nation state. In any country in the world, foreign-born residents do not have the right to vote in elections, run for public office, or obtain a

passport from that country, and often even their right to leave and re-enter the country is restricted. This is even more apparent for asylum claimants, especially those who have been relocated: even if they want to leave Romania and settle in Northern Europe, they are subject to deportation back to Romania. By contrast, a Romanian who wants to settle in Scandinavia, for example, would be free to do so. Stating that recognized refugees are better assisted by the state than Romanian citizens misses the point that under no circumstances would an asylum seeker have better access to Romanian state services than a Romanian national would.

The references to monthly allowances, which indeed are higher in certain cases than a pensioner's annuity, are equating two different things. They ignore that asylum allowances cease after the so-called integration process, once people get their papers and enter the labour market. The fact that retirement annuities are so low that Romanian pensioners cannot cover their basic needs in their old age is a problem in its own right that originated from the deregulation of state social supports in the transition from communism to capitalism, and the state's failure to raise payments to keep up with inflation. However, this us-versus-them logic – migrants versus native Romanians – also needs to be contextualized in a political-economic framework. Romania is the second poorest EU Member State after Bulgaria (Smith, 2018). Since the end of communism, it has been confronted with massive depopulation, economic stagnation, and the dismantling of its social security system. It is therefore unsurprising that migration is viewed as an inconvenience rather than an opportunity for development (Anghe and Coșciug, 2018). Economic resources are limited even for the local population, let alone for accommodating asylum seekers in a system already grappling with a limited capacity to absorb and integrate migrants (Bejan, 2020).

To claim that Romania is diverse simply because it hosts international students is a stretch. Think of medical education, for example, the field that during the Communist period attracted, and continues to attract, a greater number of foreign students. OECD data show that the number of foreign medical students in Romania averages 25,000 per year, about 5 percent of the total number of students in all post-secondary institutions in the country (Ungureanu and Socha-Dietrich, 2019). Galați, for instance, has

about forty foreign medical students, according to one of the local politicians interviewed for this study. In terms of a diverse impact on the host society, however, such numbers are insignificant. Indeed, although 73 percent of all international medical students originate from non-EU countries, versus the 27 percent who come from EU states, the top non-EU origin states of foreign students in Romania are Israel, Moldova, and Tunisia (Ungureanu and Socha-Dietrich, 2019), countries that already are culturally close to Romania.

Equating integration with merely providing migrants an initial welcome is reflective of the lack of a comprehensive migration governance structure in the country. Simply offering refuge comes to be seen as the same as some abstract vision of integration, which is yet to be implemented in Romanian society. In such a context, the state is not held responsible for assuring that society is welcoming to migrants.

An integrated framework of service provision seems also to be missing. Interview subjects said little about the importance of services in areas that facilitate integration and reduce social exclusion, such as employment, housing, health care, and family support. It is only in matters of language acquisition that the IGI is working in coordination with the Ministry of Education. An integrated framework of service provision both among various state actors and between state actors and NGOs (e.g., in providing mentoring and training programs) as well as community stakeholders (e.g., employers and property owners) is definitely needed. However, such efforts might be difficult to implement in Romania, a country where for the fifty years that it was under the Communist regime, the provision of welfare was previously the sole responsibility of the state, and one that lacked a third sector in terms of service provision.

Interviewee assertions that the state needs to select refugees carefully – made with particular reference to recent terrorist attacks in Europe – imply that those selected should be culturally, religiously, and racially similar to the national population. Such statements veil the discriminatory aspects of integration in Romania and manifest a fear of the other. Much as it is everywhere else in Europe, the fear of terrorism is exaggerated in the public policy realm (Reuters, 2021) considering the high number of asylum

claimants that have entered and continue to enter European territory without a corresponding increase in violent terrorist attacks.

Findings also suggest that it is unclear whether the participants are aware of what happens procedurally in asylum matters, or are instead basing their ideas on assumptions about how things ought to unfold. For instance, while the policy guidelines on relocation seem not to provide applicants with the option of choosing their relocation destination, some bureaucrats employed in the asylum processing system in Romania insisted that asylum claimants are transferred based on their identified preferences.

Overall, interview participants were hesitant in voicing their own opinions on relocation and resettlement, and merely repeated public information regarding official decisions. 'Relocation' and 'resettlement' were also used interchangeably, as if they referred to the same process. While legislative decisions from the European Commission clearly differentiate between relocation and resettlement, participants referred to relocated refugees from Greece and Italy and those resettled from Turkey and Jordan as if they fell under the same migration category. It is true that the terms 'relocation' and 'resettlement' are both translated as 'relocation' in Romanian (*relocare*), but some participants did refer to 'external relocation' (*relocare externă*) in talking about resettlement; however, many others did not, suggesting that participants did not clearly distinguish between the two.

This paper's findings add to the literature on migration governance in Romania and provide useful information on how asylum and state-supported integration systems operate. The information from this study related to the deportation process, to repatriation, and to the provision of information in terms of where people are housed while waiting for their repatriation papers and what services they can access, could be useful to a variety of local and regional stakeholders, including EU bureaucrats, non-profit organizations such as the UNHCR, and local groups advocating for migrant rights. In most Western European countries, such evidence is widely available and easily found on government websites and in the scholarly literature; by contrast, finding information about the asylum and integration processes in Romania often feels like searching for a needle in a haystack. More research is needed to engage the public sector and civil-

society stakeholders, including employers and the refugees themselves, in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the situation of refugees in Romania.

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