

# Change starts from within: Migration and processes of social and cultural change. A Romanian case

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## KEYWORDS

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper analyzes Romania's dynamic migratory process with a focus on the return migration from Norway and the sociocultural changes that it might involve for Romanian migrants and their home societies. The focus on Norway as a case study can bring a valuable, accurate, and deep understanding of Romanian immigration. These indicate that Romanians faced many challenges in their migratory journey in Norway, but that for a source country like Romania, return migration could, in the long term, contribute to its social and cultural changes. This research resulted in three key findings. Firstly, through their migratory experience from Norway, Romanian returnees internalized social remittances, and changed their attitudes, behavior, values, and expectations before disseminating their knowledge in their family -and social environment. Secondly, the prevalence of social remittances might be dependent on the motivation of returnees to transfer their knowledge, ideas, and practices in the scope of contributing to social change. The prevalence of social remittances might also be dependent on the way the societies of origin receive the resources that returnees attempt to transmit and culturally diffuse. Thirdly, Romania, as an emigration society, has had a relaxed attitude towards change. However, repatriated Romanians maintain a confident outlook on the potential of their skills and know-how conferring them influence over certain cultural aspects in the spheres of work and social relationships.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Based on the belief that we have a duty to strive for our visions of a social milieu where cultural norms, values and differences are embraced and cherished, this study explored the interplay of migration and social change within Romania. It presents new data about how Romania received sociocultural change through the migration wave to Norway following the country's accession to the European Union in 2007. Among the phenomena studied in this article are the multiple reasons for return migration from Norway, the variety of post-return experiences, and the expectations of the Romanian migrants. Following primary and secondary data results, this paper analyses the potential of returnees to be agents of change, as well as their intentions to make a difference in their home societies.

In order to explore the above, the following main question supported by two sub-questions have been formulated: What sociocultural change challenges does migration present for Romanian migrants and their home country? What kind of social and cultural changes have Romanian returnees, previously migrants in Norway undergone, and what are their experiences and reflections on how migration and the passage of time change their cultural and social views? How do they disseminate the knowledge underpinning these changes within their home communities after their return?

### *1.1 State of knowledge on the topic and gaps in the research*

Romania has the second biggest population in Eastern Europe, and with migrants in several destination countries, as well as a significant rate of return migration (Ambrosini et al. 2015). It has been intriguing to research how increased mobility for the case of Romania resulted in return migration and implicit effects from sociocultural change. Horváth and Kiss (2016) noticeably

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placed the Romanian migration background into important theories regarding the links between migration and social change by stating that: “the Romanian case study could be useful in highlighting the historical interrelation between socioeconomic change (development) and transnational migration” (92). Alongside Romania, Norway has been selected as a study site because it has been the recipient of brain drain and labor migrants from Romania for the past years (Anghel et al. 2016). Norway as a migration destination has ranked one of the world’s 20 least-corrupt countries throughout the 2000s in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and is considered the world’s best democracy (Paasche 2017), with a successful egalitarian value system (Aase 2021; Repstad 2021).

The knowledge gap and the objectives of this article entail outlining the challenges that migration involves for Romanian migrants and their home country. This research provides grounded insights into the Romanian migration to Norway, and presents new knowledge on the outcomes of return migration for Romania. The study provides the cultural and social reality lived by Romanian immigrants in Norway, and illustrates new aspects of the reconstructed identities of Romanian returnees by analysing the social impact that the cultural differences between the two countries have had upon them. The originality of this paper is twofold: firstly, it is given by the specifics of migrants being returnees and former residents of Norway, and secondly, it offers a unique combination of social and cultural factors involved in the repatriation of Romanian migrants, that have, to date, received comparatively less attention in most literature.

I focus on return as a type of temporary migration, because of the increased number of European migrants who fall into this category (Dustmann and Weiss 2007), but also because the issue of return has been comparatively under-studied in migration studies (Martin and Radu 2012). Therefore, the first aim of this study was to comprehend the roles of Romanian migrants in both Romanian and Norwegian societies, and give a better grasp of their needs and challenges. The second aim was to discover if Romania is a society receptive to change generated by social movements, and

I refer to this concept using the term 'social change'. My third aim was to investigate the sociocultural changes that Romanian returnees underwent, and what were their reflections on how their migration experience changed their cultural and social views. The fourth and last aim was to find out if Romanian returnees attempted to disseminate these changes from the individual level to the community level after their return, and how visible these changes are within their home communities.

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1 Return Migration***

Return migration became a topic of interest in the European migration context around 1960, but in the 1980s the return phenomenon and its impact on the sending countries started to create intense debate among scholars (Cassarino 2004). Paasche (2017) draws attention to the concept of 'social remittances', pointing to the multiple outcomes of social exchanges. Although the interest on the topic of social remittances grew within migration scholars, it has not been much discussed in the Romanian context (Anghel et al. 2016). Social research about return migration has a focus on Romanian returnees' non-economic transfers, which Meinhof and Triandafyllidou (2006) refer to as 'transcultural capital'. This is described by Kilinc and King (2019) as consisting of "transnational and translocal social networks, know-how and skills (especially language skills), lifestyles, attitudes and values" (160).

Returnees use their intellectual skills, creativity, resilience, and innovativeness, as Van Houte and Davids (2014) argues, but it is difficult to apply these aspects in bringing change in a society that is skeptical of returnees and external involvement. Paasche (2017) notes that "transformative social change has indeed occurred in Romania, but that non-migrants are selective in their adoption of ideas, norms and practices" (138). Anghel's (2019) case study shows that migration has improved Romanians' social status and enriched migrants' households and localities of origin. These

views have been countered by other writers (e.g. White 2017; Vlase and Croitoru 2019), who conclude that Romania shows circumstantial evidence of social and cultural change: “interviewees appear convinced that Romania is unchanging” (White 2017, 58) and, instead, highlight that prominent life events and structural contexts are “shaping their life courses and orienting their pursuit of life goals” (Vlase and Croitoru 2019, 794).

Return migration describes the situation where migrants return to their home country by their own choice, after being abroad for a considerable amount of time (Dustmann and Weiss 2007). Return can take different forms, such as repatriation, seasonal migration, and circular or repeated migration (Martin and Radu 2012). A return migration is a subprocess of international migration (Cassarino 2004), in which the new country of destination is the same as the country of origin. Anghel and Cosciug (2018) explain it as a process that includes preparation and application. The outcome could impact the home country from a cultural point of view, including in language, habits, styles, and attitudes. Return migration takes different forms, it can be intentional, spontaneous, or forced, and is characterized by different patterns which make it permanent, long-term, or short-term (Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider 2016).

Cassarino (2004), Zmegač (2010), King (2017), and Fauser and Anghel (2019) suggest that return does not close the migration cycle, but represents one stage in the migration process, giving the migration story a continuation after repatriation. This view has been countered by other writers (e.g. Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider 2016; Lulle et al. 2019), who argue that return migration is indirectly correlated with permanent return and the end of the migration cycle. According to Cosciug (2019), return has to be renegotiated, since both migrants and their home countries have changed during the migration process. De Haas (2010) believes that return migration could in fact contribute to social change in the countries of origin, but return migration’s potential for knowledge-based regional social change is dependent on local institutional laws, on underlying economic and social conditions (Kandilige and Adiku 2019), and on how much society accepts change (Martin and Radu

2012). Returnees are expected to play a significant role in the social change of the sending societies, but they encounter difficulties in exercising their innovative potential in their home communities (Anghel 2019).

Olivier-Mensah (2019) argues that the societal debate on return migration generalizes return processes and focuses on explicit expert knowledge and its applicability to societal growth, instead of acknowledging that return is a personal experience with different accomplishments and forms of knowledge. In practice, migration impacts are mainly associated with the different dimensions of sociocultural change, which involve aspects such as income levels, social security, living standards, and education (De Haas 2012). The new interest that international organizations have today in the complex relationship between migration and social change (Cassarino 2004; Van Houte and Davids 2014) rests on allegations that Faist (2008) summarizes as “flows of money, knowledge, and universal ideas – called remittances” that “can have a positive effect on what is called development in the countries of emigration” (21).

## ***2.2 Sociocultural Change***

The literature provides a set of determining aspects for the innovative potential of returning migrants contributing to change, and I propose the following framework (Table 1), that showcases a systematic configuration of the factors that may condition returnees to exert an influence on certain aspects in their working -and social environments. Each column displays a set of factors that influence the home community, while the aspects identified in each cell are interdependent.

**Table 1.** *Factors Driving Sociocultural Change - Theoretical Framework (own elaboration)*

<i>The dynamic composition of a society</i> (White 2019)	<i>The individuals who disseminate ideas and practices</i> (White 2019)	<i>Returnees' abilities to influence and lead by example</i> (White 2019, 149)
The social changes that occur automatically in the communities of origin (Boccagni 2019)	The magnitude of migratory flows, their duration, and their structures (Portes 2010)	Aptitudes to incorporate their cultural capital into local societies (Kilinc and King 2019)
The level of social trust (White 2017)	If returnees cultural experience is rich enough (Nowicka and Serbedzija 2017)	Confident attitude regarding skills and knowledge (Kilinc and King 2019)
If locals do not have xenophobic attitudes and are open to new ideas (Wang 2015)	Ideas that align with local cultural concepts and perceptions (Nowicka and Serbedzija 2017)	Strong intentions to be actors of change (Fauser and Anghel 2019)

Scholars have been concerned for a very long time with change in societies, as described by Kandilige and Adiku (2019) to correspond to “values, norms, behavior, institutions, and structures” (66). The concepts of migration and sociocultural change also imply the idea of transnationalization, which denotes a range of cross-border practices in the familial, economic, and sociocultural spheres of social life that the current migrant population and their social networks participate in (Faist 2008). Schiller et al. (1992) argued that a new conceptualization to encompass the experience and knowledge of this new migrant population was required, and thus created the concept of transnationalism. They defined it as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (1), and named the new type of immigrants ‘transmigrants’.

Migrants maintain strong transnational ties and relationships within different states with the help of transcultural capital (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006), which refers to the knowledge, skills, and useful social networks that migrants create and sustain with their home country. To have transcultural capital entails mastering different foreign languages, and having the competence to understand cultural differences and to communicate in the sphere of different cultures. Schiller et al. (1992) note that not all migrants

become transmigrants, but the experiences of those who do are highly influenced by cultural patterns and the processes of change underlying individual social relations. Subsequently, Olivier-Mensah (2019, 126) believes that “only a person who changes according to the motto of Mahatma Gandhi ‘be the change that you wish to see in the world’ at the micro-level can produce societal changes at meso-level”.

In relation to migration, culture is viewed as a means of empowerment. Although challenging, migrant networks use culture to affirm themselves in a new society. Migrant transnationalism scholars put emphasis on migrants’ identification with multiple nationalities and cultures, which they perceive as hybridized identities resulting from their cross-border mobility (Cassarino 2004; Faist 2008; Erdal 2020). Culture is “the realm of values, cognitive frameworks, and accumulated knowledge” (Portes 2010, 1540). It is considered a priceless gift to be protected, or an obstacle to integration or social change, yet it is mostly regarded as a product: “a material and concrete object, like a dance, a piece of music, folk art, or the tradition of storytelling that is transformed, reinvented, or threatened by migration” (Levitt 2010, 142). UNESCO (2010) defines culture as the set of unique spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a social group, that consists besides art and literature, of lifestyles, value systems, co-living, traditions and beliefs.

Besides being a product, culture is also a process which allows migrant communities to define themselves, and to create a belonging space for their representatives. International mobility gives migrants the opportunity to meet people from different cultures and to exchange identities, ideas, and values (Bărbulescu et al 2019), which can lead to continuing transformations. Although returnees are often viewed as ‘agents of change’, the contribution of migrants to social change is considered somewhat ambiguous (Oltean 2019).

Migratory movements are considered to have evolved into processes of transnational migration which produce social remittances and diversified social transformations in the migrant sending country. The transnational activity of migrants and the remittance of social and cultural capital can alter



social structures, identities, and local norms and knowledge in the origin societies (Portes 2010; Fauser and Anghel 2019). Olivier-Mensah (2019) argues that change cannot be successfully measured in all areas, and that individuals go through a process of changing personally first, after which they inspire the people surrounding them to change as well. Yet Portes (2010) disagrees that migration has been able to generate major social change, as this would involve radical changes in the value system or in the society's class structure.

### *2.3 Challenges in Bringing about Change*

During migration, migrants are marked by the complexities and challenges of their transnational identity, having to adapt to a new culture and to undertake transnational practices, while staying attached to tradition (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Upon return, migrants are viewed as social actors who make use of their social capital in ensuring initiatives following their return (Cassarino 2004). Returnees' social capital involves the know-how and cultural portfolios they bring back home, but also the transnational networks they use to accomplish their goals (Boccagni 2019). The table below gives information about some of the factors that have been mentioned in the literature to generate return. The table's top row describes the main determinants for return, while the cells from the two columns present Romanians' reasons for repatriation.

**Table 2.** *Factors Determining Return - Theoretical Framework (own elaboration)*

<i>Transnational factors</i> (Fauser and Anghel 2019)	<i>Individual migrant characteristics and vulnerabilities</i> (White 2017)
social changes that occur automatically in the communities of origin (Boccagni 2019)	a pervasive desire to help bring about changes that would improve their societies of origin (Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider 2016)
homesickness (Fauser and Anghel 2019)	cultural differences (Levitt 1998)
familial reasons (Anghel et al. 2016)	feelings of loneliness and sadness (Cassarino 2004)
intersecting life trajectories (Fauser and Anghel 2019)	psychological well-being (Fauser and Anghel 2019)
the integration process in the receiving communities (Boccagni 2019)	fear and inability to understand the new society (Cassarino 2004)
the costs of living abroad become higher than the benefits (Dustmann and Weiss 2007)	greater aspirations and innovative ideas (Cassarino 2004)
collective identities (Fauser and Anghel 2019)	sense of social belongings (Fauser and Anghel 2019)

Return and re-adaptation can be challenging for a migrant that has made considerable efforts to acquire certain values and patterns of behavior in the host society. One special challenge that migrant returnees face is when part of the family moves back home first to make the necessary arrangements for a safe and successful return of the whole family, and secure aspects such as a proper child education (Fauser and Anghel 2019) and steady jobs. Also, individuals who lose their networks and social connections because they lived for too long abroad, understand upon return that they no longer fit into the traditionalist conceptions of their origin societies, which can discourage them from pursuing their objectives (Cassarino 2004). In addition, the high expectations that locals have from migrant returnees can also be challenging (Van Houte and Davids 2014). Power relations and contextual factors such as local elites (Fauser and Anghel 2019) may also keep returnees from putting their innovative ideas into practice.

## ***2.4 Social Remittances***

The idea of social remittances was introduced by Peggy Levitt in 1998, and has been used since by most scholars researching the effects of migration on sending societies and the potential of migrants to become agents of change (White 2019). Social remittances are formed by the circumstances in the origin country, and also by the conditions of the integration process in the host country (Lacroix 2017), and are pictured as the social capital that flows from receiving- to sending-country communities. Thus, Levitt (2010) describes the concept as follows: “Social remittances involve interpersonal exchanges of ideas, skills, and know-how. They are local-level instances of global cultural creation and dissemination” (147). Social remittances generally entail values, practices, attitudes (Boccagni and Decimo 2013) and identities, norms, ideas, and behaviors (Fauser and Anghel 2019). It also involves the knowledge, qualifications, social skills, and networks that form the social capital (White and Grabowska 2019).

Considered a result of labor migration, social remittances are associated with broader phenomena of cultural change which take place in the spectrum

of return migration (e.g. Nyberg-Sorensen et al. 2002; De Haas 2010; De Haas 2012). The outcomes of remitting are seen as a gain from migration which can be applied in processes of social change (Nowicka and Serbedžija 2017; Lupoiu and Raceanu 2019). Therefore, immigrants remit "immaterial goods that distinctively impact on social and cultural discourses, meanings and practices" (Boccagni and Decimo 2013, 5), because "new ideas, a knowledge of languages, norms and other forms of cultural capital acquired abroad can often become valuable assets in the local context" (Fauser and Anghel 2019, 9). Beyond the economic dimension, returnees make their mark on the human dimension through the skills they acquire, which is "the most important potential contribution to change" (Van Houte and Davids 2014, 80) brought to their country of origin.

## ***2.5 Romanian Migration***

Life in post-socialist Romania meant high unemployment and insufficient state funds to support people and help households manage the changes that came with privatization (Chirvasiu 2002; Vlase and Croitoru 2019). These changes and the need for survival made around 4-5 million Romanians leave the country after 1990. Romania was mainly a sending country from 1950 to 2011 (Horváth and Kiss 2016). Ethnic migration was present during communism and continued after (Anghel et al. 2016), while labor migration began after 1989 and manifested toward different countries from Europe and overseas (Ambrosini et al. 2015). New types of migration emerged four years after the fall of the socialist regime, such as brain drain, irregular migration, shuttle migration, and marriage migration (Anghel et al. 2016).

Studies conducted on Romanian migrants suggest that a quarter of the migrants registered in 2003 had completed tertiary education, and that the brain drain phenomenon involved students, IT specialists and medical doctors who emigrated in Western Europe with no intention to return (Anghel et al. 2016; Anghel and Cosciug 2018). The phenomenon of Romanian emigration is marked by the departure of young people, which made the country face a significant deficit of active intelligence and trained labor

(Chirvasiu 2002). Most Romanian migrants in Europe after 2007 were young, with higher education, and one in two were married (Andrén and Roman 2016; Bărbulescu et al 2019). The average age of Romanian migrants registered in 2010 was 34.6 years (Anghel et al. 2016). Romanians who migrate nowadays have superior education and skills, as well as satisfactory jobs at home, yet they migrate in order to challenge themselves (Anghel et al. 2017). It is believed that Romanians who emigrate towards nordic countries are “more prone to acquire more social remittances such as knowledge and skills, which can be potentially used by the countries of origin” (Anghel et al. 2016, 23). The positive and sustainable effects of migration on the social change in Romania are reflected in the decrease of the unemployment rate, the social remittances of the Romanian migrants, and the cultural influence migrants have on their compatriots (Pociovalisteanu and Dobrescu 2014).

During the economic crisis, Romanians returned home only temporarily (Andrén and Roman 2016). In 2016 estimations showed that Romanian returnees tended to be migrants over the age of 45 and with low qualifications, who were mainly returning for familial reasons (Anghel et al. 2016). Romanian returnees amount to 4.5 % of the country's population, a figure which is very close to the 5 percent of returnees found in the National Demographic Survey of Romania 2003 data, and in the Census of Romania from 2002 data (Ambrosini et al. 2015). However, the available articles offer scattered information about Romanian returnees, the assets and social capital that they use throughout their return process, and their contribution to local processes of social and cultural change.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research Methods***

The conceptual framework of this paper has documented the tensions and ambiguities experienced by Romanian returnees and determined if their behavior is pursuing social change through migration. The methodology

applied for this has been qualitative, and the methods used have been literature review, interviewing and audio recording as data gathering techniques, and data analysis of interview transcripts in generating data. I collected primary data through in-depth interviews, and reviewed the literature with the purpose of constructing a theoretical framework.

For this article, I considered qualitative case study to be the most appropriate research method, where the 'case' is the Romanian migrant community that has repatriated from Norway. The interviews were conducted online due to the evident difference in location of the interviewees, and conducted semi-structured interviews by following an interview guide to keep track of questions and answers. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed to improve reliability, and the interview material was used as a resource for generating data. I investigated the observable characteristics of a sample containing 35 recent migrant returnees, and my unit of analysis was individuals and their local communities. I conceptualized and organized the data by conducting two analysis techniques, content analysis and thematic analysis. I used an inductive approach, allowing the interview data to determine the themes, and a latent approach, to underlie meanings and reasons for semantic content.

### *3.2 The sampling process*

My sample represents a limited population of participants. I applied non-probability sampling methods, such as consecutive sampling based on voluntary response, and recommendations from non-returnees. Snowball sampling additionally led to one participant. The size and nature of my sample depended partially on my criteria and resources, and partly on participants accessibility, as well as respondents' receptivity. However, the small sample size of these splits made it difficult to generalize about any particular sub-groups. The criteria that I used for my participants were that they had to be individuals that consider themselves Romanian, and returning migrants that have resided in Norway for at least six months. I limited my sample to persons between the age of 18 and 60.

In the sampling process I was able to obtain diversity of ages, generations, and social class backgrounds of the selected subjects. Since social interaction was discouraged during my interviews due to the Coronavirus, I approached people online, and invited them to participate in the research. I placed an announcement on nine different online groups of Romanians on a social media platform, and simultaneously messaged people from my network that had lived in Norway and returned to Romania. I further contacted my possible participants individually on a chatting platform or by email. Overall, this yielded a sample that included 35 return migrants, out of which 20 stemmed from my outreach on one of the social media groups, 13 have been recommended by non-returnees, and 2 persons from my social network. While not a random sample, I have no reason to believe that my sample is significantly biased beyond being limited to those who agreed to be interviewed.

### ***3.3 The Data***

The primary data presented in Table 2 constitutes detailed results of the in-depth interviews, it complements the literature review and theoretical framework from Chapter 2, and the information that will be analyzed in Chapter 5. This research was conducted between August 2020 and December 2021. Interviews with returning migrants took place online, and in audio -and telephone chat settings. The interviews were conducted from 11th August to 2nd November 2020, between my home office in Oslo, Norway, and Romanian returnees from different rural and urban settings in Romania. The interviewees are from all parts of Romania<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> More information about the research methodology can be found in the master's thesis: "Visions worth striving for: The socio-cultural changes of Romanian returnees, former migrants in Norway ", 2022, author: Florina Baru.

**Table 2.** *Main characteristics of the informant group*

<b>Data sources</b>	Gender: 15 men, 20 women	
	22 out of 35 repatriated in Southeast Romania	
<b>Time spent in Norway</b>	Time span: between 1 and 30 years	
	Average: 6 years	
<b>Age</b>	At emigration: 18 to 48	
	At interview: 21 to 55	
<b>Time since their return until the interview</b>	Time span: between 0 months and 5 years	
	Average: 25 months	
<b>Education</b>	22 out of 35 have higher education	
	13 out of 35 have secondary education	
	9 out of 35 continued to study	
<b>Work in Norway</b>	1 in supply chain management	2 in I.T
	4 in health and medicine	2 in transport
	1 in public administration	2 in engineering
	2 in business administration	2 as entrepreneurs
	2 in finance and administration	4 in hospitality
	2 in healthcare and beauty	1 in construction
	2 in the electric field	7 in education
<b>Migration status (one or more)</b>	4 out of 35 did not know where to situate themselves	
	4 out of 35 were active migrants	
	4 out of 35 were neutral to emigration	
	5 out of 35 would not return to Norway	
	5 out of 35 were between two worlds	
	14 out of 35 would emigrate again to Norway	
	14 out of 35 would not emigrate again	
	17 out of 35 would emigrate anywhere	
<b>Reasons for migration</b>	2 out of 35 felt repatriated	
	2 out of 35 for a better future	
	2 out of 35 migrated spontaneously	
	2 out of 35 followed a 2005-trend	
	4 out of 35 for financial reasons	
	20 out of 35 for job-related reasons	
	Other:	to challenge themselves
		higher education
		Norwegian partners
		Norwegian landscapes
<b>Overall experience in Norway</b>	2 out of 35 had a difficult time in Norway	
	4 out of 35 had negative migration experiences	
	29 out of 35 had a positive experience	
	5 out of 35 did not feel welcome	

	11 out of 35 felt relatively welcome
	19 out of 35 felt very welcome
<i>Reasons for return (one or more)</i>	2 out of 35 due to longing for their country
	2 out of 35 for disapproving of the Norwegian system
	3 out of 35 had spontaneous return
	3 out of 35 for further education in Romania
	3 out of 35 because of The Norwegian Child Protection
	4 out of 35 for economic reasons
	5 out of 35 because of job loss
	6 out of 35 for jobs and new businesses in Romania
	6 out of 35 for friends, network, and new opportunities
	10 out of 35 did not adapt in Norway
	13 out of 35 for familial reasons

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 *The Norwegian Sociocultural Experience*

#### *Social and cultural adaptation*

Along the way, most of the Romanians interviewed for this article believe to have integrated easily in Norway. Those who declared so, socialized a lot with Norwegians, even if they did not speak Norwegian: “I found coffee, cake and letters at the door, and an elderly thanked me for bringing her the newspaper on time. I did not encounter any communication problems with Norwegians. And I didn't know the language, so I spoke English to them. I made mistakes as well, but they left me notes with ‘tusen takk’” (I8, female, 52). Those who were sociable by nature easily made a circle of friends, and were surprised by the warmth of the locals: “I did not expect warm people in a cold country” (I20, female, 48). Those who had Romanian friends already living in Norway managed to create a social network quickly, through which they met people of other nationalities, and developed close friendships with work colleagues.

Young Romanians thought that age played a positive role in the adaptation process and in a quick assimilation in Norwegian culture. Migrants who had emigrated before in other countries adapted immediately to their local community in Norway due to their migration experience. As



well, migrants with a genuine interest to adapt had no problems integrating socially or culturally in Norway: “I liked learning something from a totally different culture than ours” (I32, female, 39). Several participants made friends in their local communities in Norway and loved the Norwegian nature: “Norwegians have a beautiful country from a geographical point of view, and with a beautiful relief. I really liked the fjords, I will miss them a lot” (I19, male, 40).

While social adaptation was easy for some participants, they weren't all interested in Norwegian culture. For the Romanians coming from a fairly homogeneous environment it was a new concept to interact with other ethnic groups in Norway. For these returnees it was a cultural shock to see so many foreigners, so many religions in the same place, and the freedom that homosexuals displayed. Some of the participants said that although they integrated in Norway, they did not make many Norwegian friends. Romanians who had a difficult time adapting in Norway listed reasons pertaining to differences of culture and mentality, the fact that they migrated alone, the difficult and harsh system in Norway, and other axes of social difference between Romanians and Norwegians.

Language was an impediment for several Romanians who declared that they had to make big efforts in order to adapt: “Language was a difficult barrier to overcome at first” (I33, female, 55). Finding a job was a challenge for those who did not speak Norwegian, or did not have a social network: “I received answers such as ‘Learn Norwegian first and then come back to us’” (I6, male, 42). However, the ambition to learn the language facilitated integration for Romanians and brought new opportunities and hope for inclusion. A few participants declared that coming across a system with a high level of security and a low level of criminality made integration seem easier: “I felt protected by the Norwegian state, although I was not an expert, I was a simple Romanian who left home in his attempt to succeed in life. I appreciate this and I hope to see the same attitude in Romania one day” (I11, male, 32).

### *Discrimination*

Some respondents expressed their subjective perspectives on the topic of discrimination. They declared to have experienced discrimination by feeling unwelcome in Norway: “On the wall in front of the boat where I was living, which was pulled ashore, it was nicely written ‘Rumenere, gå hjem!’ (Romanians, go home!)” (I4, male, 37). One participant used to hear a lot of ‘jævla jævla utlending’ (you damn foreigner), and thought that Romanians as immigrants stand no chance of integrating in Norway: “it doesn't matter how long you have lived there, you'll still be an ‘utlending’ (foreigner) to them, although they will not say it to your face. Being an ‘utlending’ at an after party, they would start talking about you when you would go out the door. However, this does not happen with a Norwegian, I have seen it more than once” (I7, male, 32). Some of the respondents expressed that they were seen in a bad light due to their association with the gypsies begging on the streets, and the prostitutes on Karl Johan street in Oslo. They also felt marginalized when they tried to find a place to rent and settle in. The discrimination noticed while in Norway was described as the most difficult aspect they had to deal with during their migration experience. Four people felt rejected in their job-seeking process when they said they were from Romania. Several participants struggled for a job in Norway, and one returnee sent over 10.000 job applications, without being accepted to any of them.

### *Help received*

In terms of institutions, not all Romanians felt that they received help in Norway: “I had to find a job for myself, to find information on how to integrate in Norway, and I was being told as a reply ‘you can find all the websites on nav.no’” (I35, female, 35). Four of 35 participants said that they did not receive help in Norway, nine declared to have received sufficient help in order to navigate life in Norway, or little help from the very close ones, while 19 participants acknowledged to have received a lot of help from the authorities, institutions, professors, doctors, employers, work colleagues,

compatriots, family members, friends or good neighbors: “I could say that I was supported by the educational system there, and institutionally, everything related to the medical system, I had pleasant experiences every time I needed help. For the most part, and from the interaction with people, I could say that yes, I had the help of friends and family” (I25, male, 25).

### *Cultural and social differences*

Romanians experienced ‘julebord’ (the Christmas dinner), got familiar with ‘bunad’ (Norwegian National costume), and enjoyed the 17th of May National parade. By getting acquainted with these practices and many more, the participants declared to have maintained several identities that linked them simultaneously to both Romania and Norway. My respondents said that the positivism specific to Norwegians influenced their living standard. The most beneficial thing to be brought from Norway to Romania was considered to be the respect for others: “I was shocked by their attitude towards people and the respect they have for each other” (I19, male, 40). Several returnees experienced that in Norway there was little emphasis on hierarchy, compared to Romania, where there are visible gaps between social classes. Bureaucratically, administratively, and institutionally, Romanians noticed a significant difference between how simple things were solved in Norway. One participant enrolled in the public administration faculty hoping to get a job and to bring a plus in the regulation of Romania through the administration-citizen relationship.

### *Individual- and lifestyle changes*

Based on the perspectives of my respondents, some Romanian returnees learned from their experience in Norway to follow rules more, to be effective, and responsible. Other returnees learned to appreciate their job and to genuinely do their best at work without expecting any reward. Those participants were grateful that the Norwegian experience made them more open-minded, autonomous, frugal, respectful, and tolerant of others. They believed that they learned to trust those around them more, to be more

empathetic, and to have less inhibitions or preconceptions. They also felt that they assimilated from Norwegians the wish to smile more and to be more kind.

The experience in Norway encouraged some Romanian returnees to develop personally, to learn a new language, and to take on new elements belonging to Norwegian culture. Romanians that were very religious changed their visions during their time in Norway, and replaced their Sunday custom of going to Church with learning and enjoying skiing. Friendships with people of other nationalities helped some Romanians with changing their perspectives on multiculturalism. Some of my participants mentioned that upon return from Norway they changed their lifestyles, ate healthier foods, and tried to be as eco-friendly as possible. They also dressed more simplistic, and designed their house in a minimalist and functional style. Moreover, certain Romanians learned the importance of staying true to one's essence: "In Romania we tend to perfect ourselves to be very official, very sumptuous, that's how we believe we can reach higher levels, whilst in Norway it's not like that. We must not forget that we can become whoever we want, while remaining humans" (I18, female, 32).

#### ***4.2 The New (Norwegian) Mindset***

##### ***Sociocultural changes***

Two returnees opened their own business during their return process to Romania, where they applied a composed way of dialoguing, a policy without hierarchies, and better work conditions for their employees:

Basically I offered subscriptions to the gym, I left the schedule flexible, you do not have to be at the office at 7 o'clock, you do not have to leave at 5 o'clock, you can take your lunch break when you want, not when I tell you, there are many benefits of flexibility that not many companies or corporations in Romania have. Only recently or just hit by the pandemic have many companies implemented work- from-home systems. We've had this thing since November 2017. We gave them money to buy their bikes if they came to

the office by bike, so they would not come by car. I paid for their public transportation if they subscribed, so they would not come by car, to contribute to saving the planet. (I14, male, 32).

The same returnee believed that if he hadn't migrated and would not had experienced things differently than in Romania, he would not have had the knowledge and the will to develop a business with a modern and international policy: "I probably would not have had the company if I hadn't left Romania" (I14, male, 32). He organized an international contest with the Faculty of Naval Architecture, and initiated Romanian students to cooperate with students from Norway: "We wanted to get involved in local life to give something back to the faculty that brought us here" (I14, male, 32).

Some of the participants said that they now employ in Romania certain values that they acquired in Norway, such as punctuality, team spirit, curiosity to share knowledge with other people, humanity, patience, perseverance, education, respect for norms and laws, maintaining a high degree of quality in completing a task, and being sociable. These changes in mentality led Romanian returnees to the belief that each of them can bring a contribution by leading by example in their community: "We may not be able to change the world on our own, but if each of us brings something good and manifests it, it will help overall" (I12, female, 41). Returnees participate in recycling practices, and are happy to see that Romanian society has adopted green activities. Two returnees continued their studies upon return because they needed the intellectual stimuli that Norway offered them. One returnee teaches Norwegian language and lectures a course in culture and civilization about Norway. She introduces Romanian students to Norwegian culture and society, by offering them information which is not easy to find: "Many students ask me about administrative matters, about school, and I help them with information or advice, or I tell them where to go, and what possibilities they have. Following the course, many students decide to go to Norway to study, or to take Norwegian language courses in Cluj" (I18, female, 32).

### *Gains for Romanian returnees*

Some Romanian returnees believe to have gained considerable knowledge which they try to disseminate through different forms of social change in their country of origin: "At a professional level I had a great ascendancy in Norway, because I was aware of a previous educational system to which I added the new one, and I have a baggage of knowledge in the pedagogical-cultural-artistic field that no one can match, without being snobbish" (I23, female, 41). Among the gains from the Norwegian experience of Romanian returnees are the relationships they established there, the economic gain, and the stable life they experienced: "The security I had counts more than all the money I earned, honestly, without worrying about tomorrow, without any stress" (I20, female, 48). For other returnees, their strong attachment to the Norwegian landscape was an absolute gain: "the fjords, the water, the air and the rocks...you just carry it" (I2, female, 35). Named as the most important gain was the new mindset, and Romanians' hope to lead by example and motivate those around them to improve on various aspects.

Subsequently, Romanians who learned the Norwegian language considered it a plus added to their portfolio. Three participants declared that their jobs in Norway helped them greatly in their professional development. Romanians who learned and now speak Norwegian believe to have had greater job possibilities upon repatriation. At the time of the interview, one returnee worked with Norwegian language as a team coordinator in a multinational, and one other worked with Norwegians at a marketing company. Obtaining a job for a Norwegian company in the same field where Romanians worked in Norway suggests that there are certain benefits in following the experiences gained there:

I could say that I managed to understand the economy better during the time spent there (in Norway), in time I learned to approach things with a much greater impartiality than I did before, to apply objectivism in many situations where I probably would not have done it before gaining this experience. I can say that it had a strong impact on me over the years. I

managed to adapt to different types of people, I overcame certain prejudices regarding other nationalities, or anything else. (I25, male, 25)

Three participants declared to have gained professionalism in terms of career, and that the job they took in Norway helped them greatly in their development: "My experience in Norway has defined me professionally and personally, the fact that I lived for five years in Norway contributed a lot to my growth. And the job I had contributed enormously, I am quite indebted to Norway for that" (I14, male, 32). Others noticed that employers in Romania are keener in hiring those who have worked abroad, and perceive them as more serious candidates: "In Norway this becomes an instinct, you dedicate yourself to your job. This is different in Romania, people do not show much interest. If I had not left, I would not have developed the interest to be dedicated to my job" (I22, male, 26).

### *Limited change in Romania*

Some Romanian returnees experienced that they re-adopted deep-rooted dispositions that they were accustomed to in the Romanian society prior to their migration, and that only some of them were able to generate major changes. Other participants did not have the wish nor the disposition to create change, because they followed the Norwegian philosophy that it was not their place to give opinions or advice, but also because Romania was not ready to change: "I do not know if you can bring something to Romania. In traffic, no, when you get to Romania, you have to drive the way they drive, otherwise you cannot get home. I do not know if you can implement something from abroad to Romanians, but 99% I think it's impossible" (I26, male, 46). Returnees that did not actively try to inspire their friends and family with their new mentality thought that if they changed anything, it was just by relating and talking to them. The little interest that returnees showed in influencing the locals suggests that non-migrants are often set in their ways, and have a traditional way of thinking: "People would react if you would try to change them deliberately, this would not be welcomed most of the times" (I2, female, 35).

### *Problems at workplace*

Overall, the participants have been striving for a work environment to support their ambitions, to help them bring behavioral change and to transform cultural norms and values. However, several respondents have expressed their subjective perspectives that they were considered a problem when they attempted to introduce new ideas. This suggests that change and transition represent complication for Romanian returnees. Comparatively, they felt that in Romania managers are bosses, not leaders, and while as employees in Norway, they could say their opinion, in Romania expressing their views has led to termination of working contracts. The disrespectful attitude that some respondents received at their workplace in Romania has brought disappointment and sadness: “People insult each other” (I10, male, 37). As some of my participants say, Romanian non-migrants do not easily see how they could benefit from returnees’ migration experience, because their vision is blinded by envy and misinterpretation.

### *Family and child welfare*

Families that returned to Romania opted for private education for their children, relating it with the public Norwegian education. Choosing high quality schools for their children’s education suggests a reaffirmation of their social standing for certain returning migrants. They believe that child's education is different in Norway because children are being raised to be independent from a young age. Also, in the Romanian culture of bringing up children, it is generally accepted that parents scold them when they think it is necessary, while Norwegian law does not allow parents to do so. The participants who are also parents said that they bring up their children based on the Norwegian mindset, and the differences in mentality seem to be shocking and eye-opening for both returnees and non-migrants:

These new generations, these tiny, tiny people that are raised in a way which is the same unhealthy and unthinkable as our generation, is one of the biggest problems in Romania. I am breaking the cycle here, very consciously,



very strongly, very determined, but this is just one child and one family and most of the other families in Romania are going down the same path. This society is going to be perpetuated again and again. But we know that we bring something better to Romania from Norway, so it is very tricky, we come home to a place where child raising is not as good as there. (I2, female, 35)

However, several returnees believe that Norway sees children as state property, and mentioned that they felt threatened by losing their children to an institution that lacks critical knowledge: “‘Barnevern’ (Child protection) is a big minus in their system. Foreigners are targeted because the internal government has no knowledge of cultural, educational and mental differences” (I21, female, 46). Three participants left Norway from the fear of being reported, for not knowing the Norwegian laws and not knowing what to do in their relationship with their children, and because of the problems their children had integrating. Although these returnees borrowed many ideas from the Norwegian mentality in terms of parenting and attempted to bring an alternative educational model to Romania, they disapproved of the way Child Protection in Norway approached the cases of families with immigration background, and were therefore not interested in coming back to Norway: “I alone could not live with this, that abuse is made on the basis of a misunderstanding, especially as my children say crazy things. I couldn't come to terms with this, to live with the stress that if something were to happen, I could lose my children” (I19, male, 40).

### *Ideas borrowed from Norwegian child education*

Nine participants who are also parents inspired co-workers, friends, neighbors and other persons from their local community regarding child upbringing. One informant said that one thing she managed to bring back to Romania was the teaching methodology from Norway, where she applies a method, follows the results, and then gives feedback, but with solutions proposals. As a change she brought to her community, one of the returnees went against the Romanian custom of keeping her children in the house during bad weather in order to prevent them from getting sick. Although

some of these participants have been told that they were too patient or too indulgent with their children, they stand for the Norwegian mentality when it comes to pedagogy and early child development: “I might not go back to Norway ever, but the language will not fade and the experiences and the landscape will not, so I am keeping Norway alive in this small family by raising my child in a way I have seen and experienced there, and ultimately this, what I carry within, is going to inevitably change people around me” (I2, female, 35).

## **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

### ***5.1 Discussion of the Findings***

Migration has had an adverse social and cultural impact on the respondents of this article, and return has been their opportunity to bring changes to the sociocultural realm in their origin societies. By analyzing the circumstances that triggered these changes, this study has identified the cause and the impact of their migration and return processes, and looked at what sociocultural change could mean for Romanians. My analysis determines three major findings, which are being discussed as follows.

The first key finding is that the most significant impacts were felt on a personal level by certain Romanian returnees, through the changes that occurred during their experience in Norway. During their migratory journey, some Romanians experienced change in mentality, perceptions, and identities. Social remittances have had a strong influence in the life of these migrants, and the changes can be seen in their lifestyles, the actions they take, the decisions they make, and the identities they develop. My findings illustrate that social remittances are not superficial, and that through their lived experiences, the Romanian returnees that understood change internalized social remittances first before disseminating them in their social milieu. The vast majority of participants in this study changed their attitudes, behavior, values and expectations, and learned how to work transnationally.

Following that, they brought change initiatives at a local level, as their transnational identities have strong spatial, social, and cultural connotations. Romanian returnees could have the power to culturally transform their local societies by the instrumentality of their changed cognitive frameworks and values.

The second key finding is that the prevalence of social remittances is dependent partially on the motivation of these 35 returnees to transfer their knowledge, ideas, and practices with the purpose of contributing to local social and cultural change, and in part on how their societies of origin receive the resources they attempt to transmit and culturally diffuse. Because of certain social interests which make local conditions present hindrances in the transfer of social remittances, returnees encounter difficulties in exercising their innovative potential in Romanian local societies. The fact that their transnational nature is misunderstood in their social environment, and particularly at their working places, suggests that the ability of these 35 Romanian returnees to remit is limited in scope. Among the mentioned hindrances were that locals from their social environments have, in general, different value systems which make them perceive returnees' drive for creating change as elements that would alienate the local culture. Noted was also that non-migrants are also often set in their ways, and consider the ideas and practices that returning migrants try to disseminate too innovative. The contextual factors such as local elites, bureaucracy and laws, as well as the interplay of structures and agency reflecting different interpretations of a meaningful life have also been a limitation in changing long-established values and views.

The third key finding is that Romania, as an emigration society, is regarded by the respondents as traditional, and slow in accepting change. However, returnees remain positive that change can be achieved through personal involvement, and by applying the innovative ideas, know-how, and the work- and meritocracy-oriented mentality they bring home. My findings show that return migration could bring regional social change for the local societies of Romania, but its potential depends on local conditions and locals'

predilection to accept change. However, most returnees do not feel that their views align with the local culture. Although they are innovation seekers, they have difficulties in bringing about social change when their new ideas clash with the locals' traditional ways of thinking. The participants believed that non-migrants are embracing many of the practices and innovative ideas that returnees attempt to diffuse, but that Romanian society has proven to be quite conservative, and that social driving forces preclude lifestyle changes. However, through the prism of their transnational identities, my participants highly value certain aspects of life and society in both Romania and Norway, and overcome pre-existing boundaries and established preconceptions in society. These Romanian repatriates maintain a position of active agents and continually remit their social capital and transcultural knowledge, hoping in this line to create a shift in the traditional Romanian mindset.

In a broader spectrum of ideas, the 35 respondents have contributed to very diversified and individualized sociocultural changes in their local societies, such as improvements of various service standards, better education, more openness in the working environment, as well as specific practices related to more individual freedom, more cultural diversity and more respect for the law. My findings show overall that Romanian returnees contribute more to social change than the researchers ascribe to them. However, it is to a small extent that returning migrants introduce their new ideas and broader experience into their home communities after their return. Subjectively speaking, Romania is a society poorly receptive to innovation and change generated by social movements. Change is possible, but it is conditioned by various aspects, such as local institutional laws, or the acceptance level of a society in regard to change. My conclusion adds to the migration theory that albeit at a slow pace, Romanian returnees can influence the occurrence of growth and social change in their local communities, supporting the dissemination of positive social remittances through their relationships with non-migrants.

While previous research has focused on the personal development of migrants, my results suggest that Romanians migrated especially for work-

related reasons. My findings strengthen the assertions of Anghel (2019) and Cosciug (2019) that returnees took advantage of the social networks, foreign language and cultural skills acquired abroad. These cultural transfers introduced changes in the way some of the respondents run businesses and organizations. Due to the social capital and local networks of migrant returnees, White and Grabowska (2019) and White (2019) considered the impact of social remittances in smaller localities to be more powerful. My findings challenge the literature by showing that social remittances were easier accepted in urban areas, and that returnees' potential to start change in smaller localities was limited. One special evidence that adds to the body of literature on migration is that some returning migrants might have created a demand in their local communities for non-traditional teaching methods, and seek for teaching institutions that would match their new visions of education and learning for their children.

This research has shown a fascinating phenomenon and little discussed so far: the repatriation of Romanians from Norway. Establishing migration-induced changes at a meso-level has been a complex and multidimensional process, and the social change of Romanian returnees could be defined as limited in scope and space. Respondents' opinions revealed truths of paramount importance for the purposes of this article, which could positively contribute to knowledge, science and our society. My results might enable a greater acknowledgement of the uncertainties through which migration is experienced, and highlight the ways in which the social environment shapes the nature of the changes occurring in the sphere of migration. In the light of the skills and social capital that returning migrants employ in their life projects, this article has outlined the patterns identified among the increasing effects of day-to-day interactions between 35 returnees and their conationals. Furthermore, it has argued that the innovative practices which modify local social relations and hierarchies, and the structural and cultural elements that these returnees are able to diffuse, could considerably contribute to social change.

## 5.2 Limitations and Recommendations

Considering the complexity and active character of the sociocultural transformations that migration brings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations in establishing the real changes that my participants brought to their home societies. A possible limitation in the results obtained for this article is that the data in this study relies entirely on my informants' ability to remember their practices and behaviors related to social activities abroad. A further possible limitation is that respondents were identified only in the beginning of the writing process. It is therefore not possible to analyze the readaptation of returnees to their home societies over a longer time span. One other research limitation relates to the lack of previous studies on the topic of sociocultural change and on return migration in Romania, particularly when compared to the entire corpus of migration studies. Finally, a key limitation of my analysis is that although I investigated returnees who had foreign experience in other countries in addition to Norway, the framework of this article did not allow me to gather data regarding their experiences from the other countries.

The findings of this paper carry significance and implications for our society and for related policy. Precise measures are required, in order to determine the number of migrants that return to their home countries, and respectively those who leave their host countries. This could be beneficial both for building up on the existing theory of migration and social change, and for developing a more responsive and effective public policy. In addition, one issue that needs to be considered in further research is how can the sending country maximize the innovative potential of returnees and benefit from the ideas and skills that migrant returnees possess. Likewise, future research could determine under what conditions states regulate processes of social change directly or indirectly through migration control in transnational social spaces. The acclimatization of returnees and the conditions that returnees face in the process of transmitting social *remittances to origin communities, are also aspects that deserve more attention from researchers*. Finally, it is important to address which other sources besides return migration generate

social change in local communities, therefore sociocultural change deserves investigation beyond the scope of this paper.

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