

The fair access of the third country nationals to successfully integrate in the Romanian society

Mihaela Tomita¹, Roxana Ungureanu¹ *, Malina Duta¹, Flavius Ilioni-Loga¹

¹ West University of Timisoara, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, Bd. Vasile Parvan, no. 4, 300223, Timișoara, Romania.

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ABSTRACT

The present paper presents the experience and situation of third country nationals living in Timisoara, Romania. Their experience is relevant to the region of Banat, in the West of the country, but broadly speaking, also mirrors the situation of various types of migrants who come to Romania. Through both individual interviews and focus groups, we obtained information concerning 4 main topics that are relevant to integration: education, health, housing, and employment. The respondents were adults who came from a background that is diversified professionally, culturally, and geographically. Thus, the sample, consisting of a total of over 50 persons, is relevant to our purpose: finding out what the needs of the third country nationals are and how can both state institutions and civil society organizations better meet those needs. After having studied material stemming from previous research and after having analysed the discourse of those whom we have encountered, we conclude that, though the Romanian state has the legal basis and premises to ensure the successful integration of TCNs in Romania, there is still work to be done in the field of putting the theoretical framework into common practice on the ground, thus ensuring the fair access of the TCNs to the tools and support they need to successfully integrate in the Romanian society.

* Contact address: roxana.ungureanu@e-uvr.ro (R. Ungureanu)

Introduction

Within the European Union, third country nationals (TCNs) are persons originating from non-EU countries, whether they are economic migrants, students, asylum seekers, family members or other categories. They do not enjoy the same freedom of movement as EU citizens, their stay being governed by both international laws and agreements, and national legislation specific to each country. Although the various integration policies fall within the national legislative field, they are monitored by the European Union, especially when it comes to the fight against discrimination.

Currently, more than 22 million TCNs live in the European Union, or more than 4% of the European Union's population, and about half of them have been living in an EU state for more than 10 years.

Those with a medium or high level of education are more likely to find a job and integrate socially, regardless of their country of origin and the country where they settle.

Over 6 million TCNs live in poverty, and less than 25% are the owners of the homes in which they live¹.

Among the TCNs, a special category is represented by asylum seekers and related groups, namely refugees and those who benefit from the temporary protection of an EU state.

In 2015 and 2016, the European Union faced influx of refugees and immigrants unprecedented after the Second World War. More than 1.2 million people applied for protection in an EU state in both 2015 and 2016, the majority of whom came from Syria. So far, this number has halved, with 630,550 asylum applications across the European Union in 2021. Most asylum seekers come from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, and the countries that receive the most applications are Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Austria.

UNHCR's Global Trends – Forced Displacement 2020 report mentions the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on asylum seekers worldwide, including in the European Union. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact

¹ The statistics have originated from various OCDE and EU reports from the 2017 – 2021 time frame.

in almost every country, disrupting health, political and economic systems around the world. People who have been forcibly displaced or are stateless have been among the hardest-pressed groups, facing rising food and economic insecurity, as well as the challenges of access to health and protection services.

The European Union makes available to third country nationals, on various websites and not only, a collection of data related to the right of residence, the right to work, public health, culture and other subjects of interest. In the future it is desired that the dissemination of the data needed for a more successful integration of the TCNs to become even easier to access.

Romanian Context

In the context of Romania, it is imperative to consider that the dynamics and evolution of migration phenomena, particularly those associated with forced migration, have exhibited distinct characteristics compared to similar phenomena observed in Western European regions. During the communist era, Romania did not officially permit emigration. Instead, Romanian citizens sought asylum in other nations. Following the events of 1989, legal emigration became a prevalent phenomenon, with Romania concurrently transforming into a recipient country for refugees.

One of the most substantial refugee inflows occurred during the cession of Northern Transylvania to Hungary as a result of the Vienna Diktat in August 1940 and the occupation of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, and Hertza region by Soviet forces in June 1940 during World War II. Historian Igor Casu's research reveals the profound suffering experienced by the population in Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, and Hertza, where approximately 90,000 individuals, predominantly of Romanian descent but also including ethnic Germans, endured repression through means such as arrest, execution, deportation, or forced mobilization for labor during the initial year of Soviet occupation (Casu, 2010).

Regarding the cession of northern and eastern Transylvania following the Vienna Diktat of August 30, 1940, this caused a massive influx of displaced persons, but, as they were ethnic Romanians, the problematic of this group was a different one.

Even during the communist era, Romania received specific categories of refugees, often guided by the geopolitical interests of the communist regime. The initial influx of refugees to Romania occurred shortly after World War II when more than 200,000 individuals, primarily fleeing the Greek Civil War (1946–1949) between the government army and the military faction of the Greek Communist Party, sought asylum in various European states, including Romania. It is noteworthy that, at that time, international refugee protection law was not fully developed, and the management of this refugee flow largely fell under the purview of the Red Cross.

Subsequently, Romania also extended refuge to Chilean asylum seekers, with over 3,000 Chileans granted refugee status following their exodus from Chile in the wake of General Augusto Pinochet's rise to power. Pinochet's military dictatorship (1973–1990), established after the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, was characterized by the brutal persecution of individuals with leftist political affiliations.

While some testimonial books addressing the experiences of Greek and Chilean refugees in Romania have been published, it is important to note that these publications do not qualify as scholarly works. As of yet, comprehensive research on immigration in Romania during the communist regime remains limited in scholarly scope.

In the post-1989 era, the primary academic focus has revolved around the emigration of Romanians to other European countries. Notable in this context is "Romanians in Western Europe: Migration, Status Dilemmas, and Transnational Connections" by Remus Gabriel Anghel, which underscores sociological distinctions between Romanian migrants to Germany and Italy.

It is noteworthy that academic attention toward immigration of refugees and third-country nationals (TCNs) to Romania only gained

momentum around 2015. This shift in focus can be attributed to two main factors: firstly, the Syrian Civil War and the subsequent mass migration to the European Union, and secondly, the recognition by the Romanian state of a labor force shortage within the country. Consequently, an increased number of work permits were issued for TCNs. Dissertations, theses, and articles related to these phenomena have since proliferated within Romanian academia. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that the field of migration studies in the global context remains nascent in Romania, necessitating scholars to rely extensively on statistics and technical reports to construct a robust corpus of scientific literature on the subject.

In Romania, in 2022, 148,000 migrants were registered, of which over 96,000 are TCNs, most of them from Moldova, Turkey, China, Syria, Nepal, and over 52,000 are citizens of the European Union / EEA / CH, most of them from Italy, Germany and France.

The main purposes for which foreigners have established their residence on the territory of Romania are employment, family reunification, the pursuit of studies, or being beneficiaries of a form of international protection.

More than one third of the foreign citizens established their temporary residence or domicile in Bucharest and Ilfov County, and over 5000 chose the counties of Constanta, Timiș, and Cluj (General Inspectorate for Immigrations, 2016).

As for the refugees, during the period with the most asylum applications in Europe (2016), in Romania there were registered a number of 1,886 asylum applications, an increase of 49% compared to 2015. This is also due to the fact that 554 people were resettled from Greece and Italy, based on EU decisions. Most asylum seekers came from Syria - 816, Iraq - 472, Pakistan - 93 and Afghanistan - 80. Some form of protection was granted in 824 cases, of which 590 were granted refugee status and 234 were granted subsidiary protection, totaling an approval rate of 73% (General Inspectorate for Immigration, Direction Asylum and Integration, 2016).

A number of 479 people were enrolled in an integration program in 2016. According to the data taken from the clarifications issued by the General Inspectorate for Immigration regarding the participation notice for the procedure of evaluation and selection of grant projects, aiming at the implementation of the action "Social integration of beneficiaries of a form of protection and of foreigners legally residing in Romania", within the National Program – Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. AMIF/17.02 as of 31.03.2017, at the end of 2016, 3,029 residence permits for persons benefiting from some type of international protection were issued.

In 2017, 4820 asylum applications were submitted, up by 161% compared to the previous year, as a result of fraudulent border crossings, mainly in the western part of the country, 3643 of the applicants benefiting from accommodation in the I.G.I. Centers.

Regarding the country of origin, asylum seekers come from states such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, etc., and most applications were submitted in Timisoara and Bucharest. In August and September 2017, five boats with a total of 476 people (with the exception of alleged smugglers) arrived in Romania from Turkey via the Black Sea. All the persons who arrived on the territory of the Romanian state came from Iraq and Iran. In 2016, only one person had crossed the Black Sea to Romania. In addition to those who arrived in Romania on this route, in 2017, over 900 people tried to cross and were intercepted or rescued by the Turkish Guard Coast.

Immigration police officers dealt with 2079 applications for international protection at an administrative stage and in 1309 cases, some form of protection was granted, of which 849 were granted refugee status and 460 were granted subsidiary protection.

At the same time, during the reference period, 1553 people were enrolled in the integration program. Over 805 were from Syria, 492 from Iraq, 79 from Afghanistan, as well as other countries.

Concerning resettlement within the EU, 174 persons in need of international protection were relocated to the territory of Greece and Italy.

In 2018, a number of 508 people with some form of protection were enrolled in the integration program developed by the General Inspectorate for Immigration, while in 2019 another 450 people who received a protection status, opted for voluntary participation in the integration program. The number of people who successfully completed a 12-month integration program fulfilling their due responsibilities was 738 refugees in 2018 and 346 refugees in 2019.

In 2018, 1027 asylum applications were solved by the General Inspectorate for Immigration in the administrative phase of which: 487 were rejected and 540 were approved. 247 persons were granted refugee status and in 293 cases subsidiary protection. In total (after the judicial phase) a total of 666 foreigners obtained international protection. In 2018, 1146 beneficiaries of international protection (from 2018 and previous years) participated in the government integration program offered by the General Inspectorate for Immigration in Romania (GII).

In 2019, 2592 applications for international protection were submitted, most of them being submitted to centers in Timisoara, Bucharest, and Giurgiu. Asylum seekers come from countries such as Iraq (686), Syria (460), Afghanistan (200), Algeria (130). 1183 applications for international protection were resolved at the administrative stage and in 563 cases, a form of protection was granted, of which 287 were granted refugee status and 276 were granted subsidiary protection. The Emergency Transit Center in Timisoara, whose purpose is to temporarily host people in urgent need of international protection, ensured the management of the 666 refugees accommodated, until the completion of the procedures for resettlement to a country of permanent residence (General Inspectorate for Immigration on 18 February 2020).

At the end of 2018, in Romania, the total number of persons with some form of protection beneficiaries of a valid residence document was 2532 persons with refugee status and 1625 persons with subsidiary protection, a total of 4157 persons.

In 2019, according to the General Inspectorate for Immigration to Romania, a total of 3880 people with a protection status were registered, of which 1550 had refugee status and 2330 people benefited from protection status. Their three main countries of origin are Syria (2090 persons), Iraq (881 persons) and Afghanistan (148) persons. Another 116 people benefiting from protection status in Romania come from Iran, 107 people from Somalia, while 85 refugees are stateless (General Inspectorate for Immigration, 2020).

In terms of age, 1080 people are minors (28%), aged between 1 and 17 years, 66 people are people over 65 years old (2%) and most of the refugees settled in Romania are adults aged between 18-64 years, respectively 2735 people (70%).

1400 people out of the total of 3880 people with some form of protection in Romania, are female (36%). Respectively 490 minors, 884 adults and 26 people over the age of 65. Male representatives counted: 590 minors, 1851 adults and 39 persons over the age of 65, representing a total of 64% of the total number of refugees in Romania.

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In 2020 in Romania, over 10,000 foreign citizens submitted an asylum application on the territory of the country and 1309 of them received a form of protection in the same year. In total, at the end of 2020 in Romania there were approximately 4000 registered people who received some form of protection from the Romanian state.

Due to the conflict in Ukraine, starting with 10.02.2022 (pre-conflict period), until 03.10.2022, 24.00, at the national level, **2,491,865** Ukrainian citizens entered Romania (police borders, 2022).

According to UNHCR Romania 80,498 refugees were living in Romania as of 18 September 2022. 67,064 refugees registered for temporary protection in Romania as of 18 September 2022 (UNHCR, 2022).

Save the Children Romania conducted an analysis with the help of a sample of 1,178 Ukrainian citizens, of which 87% are legal representatives or relatives of refugee children from Ukraine and who are in Romania, beneficiaries of the Save the Children support programs (Save the Children, 2022).

The needs that the Ukrainian families invoke, needs that they feel the cannot efficiently cover, are related to several aspect of daily life. One of the most prominent categories of needs is related to medical costs and access to healthcare services, with a staggering 62% of those interviewed by Save the Children reporting difficulties in this area. This includes the purchase of essential medicines, the provision of psychosocial support for both children and adults, ensuring medical protection for children with pre-existing conditions, assisting in the registration of children with a family doctor, and providing counseling and support during visits to medical institutions.

Non-food goods also constitute a significant area of concern, affecting 55% of Ukrainian interviewees. This category encompasses the acquisition of immediate, household, or personal items such as clothing and shoes, as well as expenses related to communication, such as telephone bills, and regular daily purchases.

Housing-related needs are another critical aspect, with 46% of those interviewed struggling to cover rent payments and utility bills for their homes, which are often located in various localities across the country.

Savings for unforeseen expenses are reported as a concern by 40% of the persons, reflecting the need for financial security in an uncertain economic environment.

Expenditure on the care and education of children constitutes a significant challenge for 32% of the interviewees. This includes costs associated with school supplies, educational tablets, and recreational

activities. Additionally, parents express concerns about ensuring the educational integration of their children.

The purchase of daily food items, vital for sustenance, presents a financial burden for 26% of those interviewed. Similarly, transportation costs, which encompass expenses related to fuel and vehicle maintenance, affect 26% of households.

Hygienic and sanitary products for children and other family members are a concern for 19% of interviewed Ukrainians, while 8% face challenges related to the procurement of clean and safe water sources.

In Romania, the main actor in the process of integration of refugees is the General Inspectorate for Immigration, which, through the mechanism of the "integration program" carried out for a maximum period of 18 months, provides assistance to refugees in the integration process in Romania. In addition to the services offered by the General Inspectorate for Immigration, 11 Regional Integration Centers operate in Romania, organized in 5 geographical regions, in: Bucharest, Brasov, Craiova, Timisoara, Oradea, Constanta, Galați, Iasi, Radauti, Cluj Napoca and Baia Mare.

The Regional Integration Centers, funded by the National Program – The Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund by the European Commission and the Romanian Government, offer similar services in any of the 11 locations, thus offering a unitary approach at national level and integrated services, such as one-stop-shop, in providing the information and assistance that people with a form of protection in Romania and third country nationals need: access to employment, access to health services, access to educational, cultural, housing and social services, active participation in community life.

The Regional Integration Centers also work towards strengthening the collaboration and active involvement of the authorities/institutions, the private sector, and other entities with attributions in the field of integration.

The total budget for 2019 / 2020 allocated to the operation of the Regional Integration Centers is 7,571,611 Ron (respectively 1,590,975.39 euros).

All language and culture courses Romanian offered to refugees at the Regional Integration Centers in Romania follow a common curriculum based on a coherent package of educational resources for learning Romanian as a foreign language and orientation in society that takes into account the needs of migrants.

According to the Integration Barometer for 2017 conducted by the Center for the Comparative Study of Migration in Romania, published in 2018, most immigrants, both people with a protection status in Romania and third country nationals (TCNs) rent their place of accommodation (74%), unlike the local population (4.5%). More than 20% of immigrants (protection beneficiaries and TCNs) say they are discriminated against on the grounds that they are immigrants, that they have a different race or ethnicity, or because of the way they speak the Romanian language; 44.8% complain about discrimination in relation to public transport companies, followed by the General Inspectorate for Immigration (42.9%) and schools (40.6%) (Cosciug and Racatau, 2018, p. 10).

According to the report "Refugees in Romania 2018, An Assessment of Pathways to Integration" conducted in 2018 by the Research Institute of Quality of Life for the Romanian National Council for Refugees, integration is defined by the following factors:

- the integration depends on the previous knowledge about Romania;
- integration depends on and takes a different form from the pre-existing networks in Romania;
- integration depends on where the refugee's family is located;
- integration depends on the initial conditions encountered by asylum seekers upon arrival;
- integration depends on the institutions and organizations
- that provide support after the moment of protection.

The report shows the context in which refugees come to Romania is rather an unfavorable one, with general attitudes of the population towards immigrants being on a negative trend and rather aimed at rejecting newcomers. Refugees are, however, represented more favorably, with the

majority of the population agreeing that they need help, but with a balanced share of those who want to and those who do not want to accept refugees. Public administration seems to follow the same pattern. Apart from those directly involved in refugee support programs, the attitude is rather reserved and, in many cases, negative towards newcomers (Voicu, et. al. 2018).

With regards to the topic of health, during previous years the press promoted the idea that the migrants were medically dangerous, bringing various dangerous diseases to the national territory, a fear that only increased with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This stereotype is one that circulates in various countries, not only Romania: *"Regardless of the available medical and epidemiological evidence, metaphors of plague and infection have circulated and been used to marginalise and keep out diaspora communities in host countries in an effort to 'exclude filth'"* (Harper, Parvathi, 2008). However, the positive attitude towards the Ukrainian beneficiaries of protection toned down this kind of medical stereotypes and preconceived ideas on the Romanian territory.

Methodology

In Romania, the study was conducted in Timisoara, the largest city in the Banat region. Timisoara represents in itself a case study in the sociological landscape of tolerance, multiculturalism, and refugee support. Rooted in its historical legacy as part of the Habsburg Empire, Timisoara's sociological dynamics offer unique insights into the coexistence of diverse ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs.

The historical foundation of Timisoara's sociological landscape traces back to its affiliation with the Habsburg Empire. This affiliation fostered an atmosphere of enlightenment and acceptance, encouraging the harmonious coexistence of various ethnic and religious communities.

Taking all this into consideration, scholars argue that the commencement of the 1989 Revolution in Timisoara was not a mere coincidence but rather rooted in its rich intercultural heritage. Professor Nicolae Popa asserts that the unity displayed by the city's inhabitants,

irrespective of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, when they rallied together to protest and protect a member of a minority group (a Hungarian priest, to be more precise), exemplifies how the civic spirit, cultivated alongside the multicultural societal ideals advocated by the Habsburg Empire, became a defining characteristic of Timisoara (Popa, 2006, p. 181 – 182).

Professor Adriana Babeti characterizes Timisoara as an urban space with a unique identity within the broader Romanian urban landscape, upholding an enduring distinct behavioral pattern (Babeti, 2008, 24). It is worth noting that in the early twentieth century, Timisoara stood as a cosmopolitan metropolis, serving as a recognizable urban landmark within the Central European context. Unlike other metropolises that solidified their identities during the same era by accommodating diverse minorities, Timisoara did not segregate along ethno-linguistic lines. Another significant factor that facilitated the emergence of a harmonious society, evolving from multiculturalism to interculturality, was the multilingualism prevalent among residents from various socio-professional backgrounds (Babeti, 2008, 31-32).

To exemplify these assertions, we present two interviews from the volume 'Worlds in Destinies,' edited by professor Smaranda Vultur. One notable life story comes from Frederic König, born in 1910 into a family of German intellectuals. Reflecting on Timisoara, Mr. König reminisces: '1910, you realize, was another world. Back then I was also part of an empire [...]. When Halley's comet graced the sky with its luminous tail, my father, a polymath, possessed a small telescope at home to observe the stars. [...] I obtained a passport within two days. Timisoara hosted consulates of various nations, including Italian, Belgian, and French, among many others, hence my swift acquisition of the passport' (Vultur, 2000a, 214-219).

Another illustrative account stems from Edith Cobilanschi (Vultur, 2000b, 309-310), born into a mixed family of German, French, Czech, and Austrian heritage in Timisoara. When addressing ethnic minorities and the languages spoken in her youth, Mrs. Cobilanschi emphasizes, 'Friends

transcended nationality,' and notes that 'We conversed in numerous languages and comprehended one another seamlessly. It bewilders me today when I hear people categorize individuals based on their ethnicity. If you look at my group of friends, they encompass Romanians, Hungarians, Serbians, and the remaining Germans.'

This local context represents the background of our research.

In the current research endeavor, the primary focus entails a comprehensive examination, analysis, and profound comprehension of the principal impediments encountered by Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) in their pursuit of accessing fundamental services, alongside an exploration of their specific requisites pertaining to this subject matter. This study, in addition to elucidating the requisites of migrant individuals, encompasses an evaluative scrutiny of the strategies harnessed during the processes of social integration. The research methodology encompasses a multifaceted approach involving desk research, interviews, and focused group discussions. These engagements are conducted with a diverse spectrum of stakeholders, encompassing Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), migrant citizens, asylum seekers/refugees, TCNs' associations, women's organizations, and providers of public services.

The principal objectives of this research initiative encompass the following:

To augment the knowledge of civil society and public service providers regarding the formidable barriers confronted by TCNs in their quest for accessing fundamental services and to foster an enhanced awareness of the available local-level resources.

To foster an amelioration in coordination and operational collaboration among civil society entities and public service providers by instituting a cohesive and intra-referral system aimed at facilitating inter-organizational connectivity and information exchange.

The data collected is analysed through descriptive and relational statistics in order to meet the objectives of study and to identify and prioritize the needs indicated by the TCNs. The strategy adopted for the analysis of the

variables, namely those that describe the migrants' characteristics and those that describe their needs, is based on a descriptive statistical analysis, namely proportions and content analysis.

Methodology in Romania

Between June and September 2022, 10 interviews were conducted, of which 8 with TCNs and 2 with people working with them in various state institutions. Also, 4 focus groups were carried out, in which a total of 43 people from both groups mentioned above participated. TCN participants came from the following countries: Afghanistan, Peru, Syria, Turkey, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (Caribbean), Saint Kitts and Nevis (Caribbean), Ukraine, Côte d'Ivoire and Sudan.

The participants were always instructed, at the beginning of the interview/focus groups, that they can decline to answer a given question if they consider it intrusive or bothersome. If we did not feel comfortable directly asking certain questions, for instance if they considered themselves vulnerable, you can rephrase the question in order to come across as a more mild / less intrusive enquiry. The questions were devised after many hours of discussions with all kinds of persons, including traumatized ones, so the questions per se were not harmful. We were just careful with the context, in order to put the participants at ease. As such, the interviews and focus groups were conducted in friendly and relaxed locations, with the participants having water, coffee and light snacks at their disposal.

As the needs assessment also aimed at investigating the main tools and channels of information of migrant citizens and their access to public services, we decided that one of the focus groups is to be held with CSO members and public services employees, in order to have their perspective on the matters of interest (employment, health, education and accommodation of TCNs). Thus, we held one focus group with CSOs and public services employees, and also 2 individual interviews with public services employees that deal with TCNs on a regular basis.

The identification of the possible migrant responders for the group and individual research took place after the desk research of the civil society and public service providers. In this manner, the migrants were easily contacted through a trusted institution or person.

As there was no COVID-19 emergency taking place during the time when the interviews and focus groups were conducted, all encounters were in person.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted in Romanian, English and Ukrainian (with the help of a translator).

We conducted a number of 10 individual interviews with TCSs (8) and service providers (2) and 4 focus groups with a total number of 43 participants.

Results and Discussions

Interview Results

In the cases of individual interviews with TCNs, the interviewees were: students (2), asylum seekers/refugees (2), beneficiaries of temporary protection (2), and economic migrants/family reunification (2). The 4 essential elements for integration and access to socio-economic life were discussed: education, health, housing, and work.

The most frequently invoked barrier to integration was the linguistic one, with many of the TCN participants stating that the low number of language courses Romanian and/or the impossibility of accessing the courses (due to the schedule not being adapted to their needs and/or because of high prices) prevents them from learning Romanian, which makes it difficult for them to access the labour market and to integrate socially. Of the TCNs, the most affected by the lack of sufficient options for Romanian courses are firstly asylum seekers, and secondly, the beneficiaries of temporary protection in Ukraine. In Timisoara, people with temporary protection benefit, free of charge, from the Romanian language courses offered by the West University

of Timisoara, but asylum seekers do not. Also, as these courses are intensive, the possibility of working while taking them drastically reduces. There are also free Romanian language courses offered by 2 NGOs in the city, but these courses are for beginners and do not help those who want to be able to speak fluently in a relatively short time. Two of the participants state that they managed to get employed in positions that require higher education without speaking Romanian, but English and French, because they have qualifications in areas in which verbal communication is less important (IT and accounting). The only TCNs interviewed who do not face the language barrier, or are affected by it to a much lesser extent, are the TCN students who benefit from a scholarship, because the language courses are part of their university course. In the first year, after admission, the university offers language courses for them. The courses are free of charge and thus provide the opportunity for students to learn Romanian and adapt to a new culture.

Another problem raised by the TCN participants, except for the beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine, was the cumbersome relationship with the Romanian authorities, especially when it comes to the extension of residence documents.

In Romania, in order to benefit from the rights offered by the Romanian State, it is necessary for each person to have a personal identification number (CNP). Thus, the first step that the authorities (GII) are taking, is to release such a CNP.

The access to the Romanian national identification number is granted, together with temporary protection, by the General Inspectorate for Immigration. In Romania, the following categories of persons may benefit from temporary protection:

- a) Ukrainian citizens, regardless of the time of arrival in Romania, and their family members;
- b) non-Ukrainian or stateless third-party citizens who benefitted from a form of international protection or an equivalent national form of protection, in Ukraine, before 24.02.2022, regardless of the time of arrival in Romania, and their family members;

c) non-Ukrainian third-party citizens and stateless persons who left Ukraine on or after 24.02.2022 and who prove that they have legal residence in Ukraine, based on a permanent residence permit issued in accordance with Ukrainian legislation and who cannot return, under safe and stable conditions, to the country or region of origin and their family members - if the sponsor is recognized by the Romanian authorities as a beneficiary of temporary protection.

As for the other asylum seekers, their cases are analyzed individually and those who obtain the protection of the Romanian State (which grants the following 3 statuses: refugee status, subsidiary protection, or tolerated status) receive the CNP and the rights arising from its existence.

A third problem, this time raised only by refugees, was the difficulty of having access to accommodation. The reason is, according to the refugees, discrimination based on ethnic or religious stereotypes, as they are considered "too different " by the locals. As Gavreliuc (2003, p.77) underlines in his work, "The primary subliminal cliché, the stranger is the enemy, who transgresses history and cultural spaces so different, maintains the fear of otherness as well as the core of a mystery hidden from the one who is not close to us, fueling an ethnocentric attitude [...]".

In the case of TCN scholarship students, accommodation in student dorms is provided by the host university, and beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine benefit from the 50/20 program. In contrast, refugees do not receive the support of state institutions in finding a home, nor do they receive meaningful financial support. Some CSOs offer, within the limits of the available funds, financial aid for the payment of rent for refugees, but these funds are limited and do not represent a long-term solution. Some of the refugees have also complained of discrimination by homeowners.

In the course of individual interviews conducted with third country nationals, several favorable aspects were discerned. These include the ability to avail themselves of high-quality medical services, as well as a prevailing sentiment among TCNs that, in spite of the aforementioned impediments they faced, their fundamental rights are generally upheld. Furthermore, TCNs

expressed the belief that with the provision of more comprehensive systemic support, particularly in the context of refugees, a successful process of integration in Romania could be achieved.

From the two interviews conducted with 2 representatives of the local public authorities (DGASPC and Timis Prefecture) it appears, as well, that the biggest barrier is the linguistic one.

Focus Groups Results

A number of 43 people took part in the 4 focus groups.

The focus groups with TCNs included people from the same categories mentioned before, while the participants in the 4th focus groups were representatives of local public authorities and NGOs.

The main themes were the four categories relevant to integration and access to socio-economic life in Romania: education, health, housing, and employment.

Currently, there are approximately 40,000 Ukrainian children in Romania, of which 10% are integrated into a Romanian form of education. Many of the children continue online school in Ukraine, but this will end in the fall of 2023 (no more online classes will be held).

Ukrainian parents request afterschools and special classes with exclusive teaching in the Ukrainian language. There is currently no legal basis for this. As far as afterschools are concerned, the Union of Ukrainians in Timis provides support as far as possible.

Although many children (Ukrainians or TCN migrants) physically attend Romanian schools, they are not actually enrolled in the education system, because the equivalence process for those who do not present transcripts is very difficult and lengthy (each subject is tested separately).

The Parliament was asked to create a preparatory year for the Romanian language starting in the autumn of 2022, thus after graduating this year of linguistic training the children will be enrolled in the Romanian education system (in 2023). There is currently no legal basis for this.

In the realm of **education**, the outcomes derived from four focus group discussions elucidated both advantageous aspects and impediments confronted in accessing educational services. The identified strengths encompassed a facile interplay between state entities and civil society, an uncomplicated avenue for the registration of minor migrant students in Timisoara (though not formal enrollment), and a certain level of training in intercultural mediation among CJRAE (County School Inspectorates for Refugees and Stateless Persons) teachers.

Conversely, the encountered difficulties encompassed a dearth of intensive language programs tailored for immigrants to acquire proficiency in Romanian, financial challenges relating to meal expenses at kindergartens for migrant minors (with partial coverage by NGOs), and a labyrinthine process for the recognition of foreign diplomas or qualifications.

The examination extended to the domain of **healthcare**, revealing that asylum seekers, based on their Romanian CNP (personal identification number), are eligible to access the same medical services as Romanian citizens. Strengths in this domain encompassed unfettered access to the emergency healthcare system for all immigrants, cost-free medical services for asylum seekers within Asylum Centers in Timisoara, expeditious access to healthcare services for Ukrainian beneficiaries on par with Romanian citizens, support from private medical institutions for Ukrainian beneficiaries, the availability of a dedicated national medical helpline in Ukrainian, and financial support from NGOs to defray medical expenses.

However, encountered challenges included the language barrier, necessitating reliance on volunteer translators who, in most cases, lack formal accreditation, thus posing issues in legal proceedings and official document translation. Furthermore, the absence of a state or private system for employing professional translators to aid Third Country Nationals (TCNs) in vulnerable situations was noted. Additionally, financial constraints in procuring medications, albeit partly mitigated by local NGO support, were reported.

The **housing** component was analyzed from two perspectives: the support provided by the Romanian state to TCNs from Ukraine and the rights conferred upon asylum seekers from other countries. The strengths observed entailed accommodations funded by individuals or economic agents, reimbursed by the state at a rate of 50 RON per day for lodging and 20 RON per day for meals for Ukrainian beneficiaries. However, disparities in treatment were noted, with discrimination against TCNs by certain homeowners, the challenge of securing affordable rents in Timisoara, and a paucity of social housing.

In the final component concerning **employment**, a spectrum of strengths and challenges were delineated. Facilitating employment, the Romanian National Employment Agency (AJOFM) provided support to TCNs, organized targeted job fairs, and availed a labor market rich in opportunities, particularly in Timisoara. Ukrainian TCNs found ample work prospects, with some enterprises actively seeking Ukrainian employees. NGOs offered training initiatives to enhance software skills for employability.

Nevertheless, a litany of difficulties were reported, including the language barrier for individuals who lacked proficiency in Romanian or English, undocumented individuals, limited access to professional practice for non-EU doctors within the EU, challenges for overqualified individuals (e.g., teachers, doctors) in finding jobs commensurate with their qualifications, childcare issues for women with young children, modest salaries for positions without requisite training, and a notable reluctance among asylum seekers in Timisoara to seek employment, driven by limited admission opportunities and a desire to seek opportunities in other European countries. Notably, asylum seekers and refugees predominantly found employment in restaurants, often alongside Arabic or Pashto-speaking colleagues. Additionally, the lack of access to training opportunities due to missing documentation hindered immigrants from capitalizing on their experience, particularly in the food and restaurant industry, raising concerns about exploitation risks and labor disputes, a trend observed primarily among Ukrainians and other immigrant groups.

In the case of the other TCN migrants (especially the economic ones), the legal steps necessary for employment take at least 6 months when workers are brought in to work in specific fields (constructions, hospitality, etc.). The employing companies follow the legal steps and also collaborate with IGI. The relevant governmental institutions annually announce the number of available places in areas with a shortage of Romanian or EU employees (last year it was about 100,000 available places (visas available regardless of the field of work), especially in construction and hospitality.

Asylum seekers have the right to work three months after officially applying for asylum.

Conclusions

An analysis conducted by the UNHCR in May 2022, involving interviews with 3,240 Ukrainian refugees in Romania, shows that the most pressing needs of refugees are related to income (38%), family reunion (28%), jobs (28%) and medical services (27%).

- As for the difficulties faced by asylum seekers and refugees, some of these are:
- Poor conditions and insufficient number of places in reception centres for asylum seekers: in Romania there are only six accommodation centres with a total of 1,100 places.
- Difficulties finding work, due to the status of asylum seeker, discrimination and various forms of exploitation in the workplace.
- Insufficient financial support from the Romanian state: the asylum seeker benefits, upon request, of food within the amount of 10 lei / person / day, of clothing within the amount of 67 lei / person / summer season and 100 lei / person / winter season, to which is added 6 lei / person / day representing expenses with local transport, cultural services, press, repair services and expenses for personal hygiene. When the places in the centers are exhausted, the asylum seekers can benefit from material assistance for housing, within the limits of the available

funds: for renting a house, 450 lei / person / month, and to cover the maintenance costs, 120 lei / month / person for the warm season and 155 lei / month / person for the cold season. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, the situation is different: only Romanians hosting Ukrainians can receive from the Government 50 lei / day per person for accommodation and 20 lei / day per person for meals.

- The language barrier to further education and profession.
- The difficulty of renting an accommodation due to the prejudices of the owners, especially towards people of color or from the Middle East.
- Lack of information on their rights.
- Discriminatory or even abusive treatment by the police and other public institutions.

The evaluation report of the national system of integration of beneficiaries of international protection (Voicu, 2021), made by the Center for Public Innovation Association, based on the data collected in 2021, shows that the Romanian policies regarding the integration of refugees and beneficiaries of international protection in the Romanian remain deficient. Immigrants to Romania enjoy basic rights and relative security, but they do not have enough opportunities for integration. Although national laws are favourable overall, there are many difficulties in putting the legislative framework into practice. The beneficiaries of a form of international protection have, theoretically, the same rights as Romanian citizens (except for political ones). However, public institutions fail to build a framework in which these rights can be fully operationalized.

The aforementioned analyses and reports delineate the overarching national-level context. Derived from an empirical examination involving interviews and focus groups conducted within the locale of Timisoara, Romania, with Third Country Nationals (TCNs), the ensuing deductions are as follows:

Primarily, the predominant impediment encountered by all strata of TCNs pertains to the language barrier.

In effect, three discernible categories of TCNs are observable in Romania: refugees, recipients of temporary protection (notably, Ukrainians), and other TCN migrants, encompassing economic migrants, students, and those reuniting with family members.

Despite refugees constituting the most vulnerable cohort, they receive the least assistance and tend to exhibit reticence in discourse, particularly with regard to expressing adverse sentiments.

The authorities exhibit differential treatment towards distinct TCN categories, with a proclivity to concentrate resources and attention on the exigencies of certain groups, such as beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine, while the needs of other TCN categories remain unaddressed, and in some instances, unknown.

Both public servants engaged in TCN-related initiatives and researchers are implored to acknowledge that migration and integration represent complex realities, often shrouded, understated, fetishized, or even obscured by layers of theoretical terminology, as elucidated by Herrera (2001). It is incumbent upon them to consistently engage with primary sources, specifically through discussions that take the form of interviews, focus groups, or other direct forms of communication with the pertinent TCNs.

Conspicuously, a blind spot exists in the needs assessment process, as economic migrants from India and Southeast Asia, including Thailand and Vietnam, who have witnessed an upsurge in their presence within Romania, did not participate in this phase. Presently, they remain relatively isolated from a societal perspective, manifesting visibility primarily within occupational spheres such as construction and the hospitality industry, while remaining less conspicuous within the socio-cultural milieu. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) operating in Western Romania do not prioritize this demographic, thereby complicating outreach efforts and the comprehension of their requisites.

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