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# RETURN INTENTIONS OF ROMANIAN MIGRANTS FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM: AN EXPLORATORY APPROACH

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## Abstract

Return migration is a complex phenomenon driven by a combination of individual, familial, societal, and economic factors. This study aims to discover the key reasons that limit return intentions of Romanian migrants from United Kingdom to their country of origin. Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods, semi-structured interviews with experts involved in the integration of Romanians in the United Kingdom, and an online survey among Romanian migrants, this study identifies a series of factors that determine Romanian workers' return intentions. The results indicate that available jobs in the communities of origin in Romania where they have families, and where family solidarity networks are created, are important drivers of return migration. The need to improve government measures to stimulate the return of Romanian workers must be seen in the broader context of the functionality of families with migrant workers, considering both the positive and negative consequences of labour migration for the quality of family life, and the care provision for dependents (children and elderly people).

Keywords: migration, return intention, migrant-worker profile, social network, mixed research methods.

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## Introduction

Return migration is defined as the movement of migrants back to their country of origin to restore residence in that country (Gmelch, 1980). The return decision is influenced by a multitude of social, economic, and political factors (OECD, 2020). Empirical evidence on return decisions suggests that the reasons for returning to the country of origin are associated with factors from both the country of migration and the country of origin. When migrant workers fail to obtain legal status in the host country, they experience difficulties in social integration, and the decision to return to the country of origin is accentuated. Research related to the decision-making process (OECD, 2020) is not well developed; therefore, there is a growing need for empirical evidence in this area.

The intention to return is a thought that does not necessarily turn into actual return. Constant and Massey (2002) highlighted that only a small proportion of those who declared their intention to return have actually returned.

Caro Carretero et al. (2018) grouped the determinant factors of return intentions into four categories: personal features (gender, age, nationality, length of stay), social connections (family ties, partners in the host country, home ownership in the host country), economic factors (participation in the labour market, access to social protection systems), and economic, social, and political contexts in both the origin and destination countries.

This study focuses on the profile of migrant Romanian workers in the United Kingdom (UK), thereby contributing to the substantiation of measures to support the return policy in the country of Romanian migrant workers.

A vast body of literature analyses the phenomenon of migration; however, Romanian migration remains insufficiently studied. The Office for National Statistics reports that, in 2021, there are 342,000 Romanian-born persons lived in the United Kingdom (179,000 men and 163,000 women), representing almost 6.09% of non-British population living in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2021a). Romanians' long-term mobility is motivated especially by work (Barbulescu *et al.*, 2019). Those who have difficulties integrating into the labour market in the United Kingdom are generally low-income people with financial and family difficulties in their country of origin (Romania) (The Migration Observatory, 2022). Labour migration represented the most significant share of Romanian migration (Anghel, & Cosciug, 2018). Romanians were attracted by a rich job offer in a differentiated secondary labour market (Anghel *et al.*, 2016). In addition to the size of migration, the nature of this phenomenon is a very important issue. The scientific literature has highlighted the prevailing temporary nature of the EU post-accession migration (Favell, 2008; Wallace, 2002). This indicates that there is, at least in terms of return intentions, the probability of returning to the country of origin, and the role of the policy measures to support this must acquire special importance.

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## Return migration theories in the context of left behind members

The main economic theories of migration contain divergent assumptions about return migration and the factors that determine this decision (De Haas, & Fokkema, 2011). The neoclassical theory of migration (Harris, & Todaro, 1970) assumes that individuals are rational actors who decide to migrate to maximise their income. They migrate wherever they expect to earn a higher salary. Neoclassical theory explains migration in terms of the cost-benefit ratio for individuals. If the benefits of migration (measured as the wage gap between the country of destination and the country of origin) are greater than the costs associated with this process (cost of transport, establishment in the host country, etc.), migration would be the rational choice (Borjas, 1989). Thus, migrants who are economically successful in the host country are expected to settle permanently there. Return migration is seen as a sign of migrants' failure to achieve expected gains. Therefore, migrants returning to their country of origin are considered losers (Constant, & Massey 2002; De Haas, & Fokkema, 2011). Regarding return intentions, it can be stated that the more economically successful migrants are in their destination country, the less they will want to return to their country of origin.

However, the neoclassical theory does not consider the non-economic factors that determine migration, and is thus unable to explain real-life migration patterns. Critics of this theory point out that individuals are not isolated, purely rational actors who base their decision to migrate only on prospects of maximising income (Castles *et al.*, 2014). Factors such as age, gender, level of education, and cultural habits play a role in the individual's decision to leave their country of origin.

Another theory of migration, entitled *The New Economics of Labour Migration* (Stark, 1978, 1991), retains rational choice as the basic element of the theory, but places the household rather than the individual, at the centre of the decision-making process. The theory interprets migration as a strategy of households and extended families to share income risk within them and overcome market constraints in the country of origin, with migration providing additional income (De Haas, & Fokkema, 2011; Stark, 1991). According to this theory, individuals migrate to reach certain income targets. They remain in the host country for as long as they fail to reach their income target (either because of unemployment or higher costs of living). The new economy of labour migration considers return migration not as a failure, as does the neoclassical theory of migration, but rather as an indicator of economic success (De Haas, & Fokkema, 2011).

In the specific case of labour migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, current research has shown that economic success in a Western country increases the tendency to stay in that country and negatively influences the intention to return (Snel *et al.*, 2015). The explanation lies in the fact that the relatively short distances and the opening of borders in the European Union have made it possible

for successful migrants to remain in the host countries, and at the same time maintain frequent contact with the countries of origin.

However, Snel *et al.* (2015) show that economic success in the host country does not influence intentions to return to the country of origin, therefore, neither the neoclassical theory of migration nor the theory of the new labour migration economy can explain the return intentions of migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe. This observation is consistent with previous studies showing either that there is no influence of economic success on the return intentions of migrant workers or that the influences are mixed (Bijwaard, & Wahba, 2014; Carling, & Pettersen, 2014; Constant, & Massey, 2002; De Haas, 2010). One possible explanation is that migrants return home for various reasons. Some individuals return home after successful migration, whereas others return after failure. Bijwaard and Wahba (2014) observed that the intensity of return migration has a U-shaped relationship with migrants' incomes, implying higher intensity in both low-income and high-income groups. Therefore, it can be said that the two theories are complementary and not mutually exclusive (De Haas, 2010).

While economic theories explain return migration and return intentions of migrant workers with reference to economic factors, a third theoretical perspective focuses on the sociocultural dimension of migrant integration.

The theory of sociocultural integration highlights an inverse relationship between migrants' sociocultural integration and their intentions to return. Thus, the stronger the sociocultural integration of migrants, the weaker their intentions to return to their country of origin. Several studies have confirmed this relationship (Constant, & Massey, 2002; De Haas, & Fokkema, 2011). Socio-cultural integration must be understood in terms of identification with the culture of the host country, frequent social contacts with native citizens, participation in the social institutions of that country or fluent language of that country (Snel *et al.*, 2015). The theory also mentions an inverse link between the length of stay in the destination country and intention to return to the country of origin. The longer migrants stay in the host country, the stronger they will integrate, and the more difficult it will be to return to the country of origin (both in terms of financial and emotional costs). This relationship is in line with the observations of several studies (Constant, & Massey, 2002; Jensen, & Pedersen, 2007).

A fourth theoretical perspective on migration is provided by the theory of transnationalism which refers to the process by which migrants create and maintain multiple social ties between their host country and their country of origin (Carling, & Pettersen, 2014). Consistent with this theory is the conjecture that transnational links and their integration into transnational networks influence migration intentions and decisions. Involvement in such networks makes migration affordable, and thus more likely (Massey, 1990; Samers, 2010). In relation to return migration, the theory of transnationalism highlights a direct link between the transnational activities of migrants (frequent visits to the country of origin, sending remittances,

etc.) and return migration, independent of economic success or failure in the host country. Snel *et al.* (2015) note that migrants from Central and Eastern European countries generally do not send remittances, and do not invest in their country of origin only to support their family members, but also by virtue of their plans to return to that country.

In conclusion, migration is a very diverse and multifaceted phenomenon, and thus cannot be explained by a single theory (Arango, 2000). Rather, the phenomenon of migration involves a complex interaction of economic, social, and cultural factors (Maastricht University, 2018).

While emigration is determined by the better conditions offered by the country of destination, knowledge of return migration requires additional, qualitative information about both the migrant worker and his family.

The literature on return migration also examines non-economic factors that can also have a significant effect on return (Piotrowski, & Tong, 2010). This literature argues that return must be understood in the larger institutional context of the family. Factors such as marriage, parenthood, and caring for ageing parents can motivate migrants to return from their destination countries. Care provision for dependent older adult members remains a future challenge in transnational families, especially considering the predominant (informal) family care regime. The researchers use the term ‘transnational ethnomorality of care’ to describe the situation in which both parents ageing at home and their migrant children accept the fact that most of their children’s care responsibilities have been transferred abroad (Czapka, & Sagbakken, 2020). Migration enables children to provide monetary support, but spatial separation makes it difficult for them to provide instrumental and emotional support (Baldock, 2000; Smith, 1998). For ageing parents, adult children are the support and care pillars. Labor migration and depopulation in certain areas has left communities of older persons without the support and care of their descendants, and the effects are felt both at the individual level and at the level of the social and medical assistance systems (Czapka, & Sagbakken, 2020; Zaiceva, 2014). Caring for left behind dependent parents represents a real challenge for migrant adult children, and generates internal conflicts that affect the emotional well-being of those who have gone to work abroad (Czapka, & Sagbakken, 2020), as well as the mental health of older parents (Thapa *et al.*, 2018). Intergenerational support decreases, since more and more adult children chose to migrate, and it is estimated that fewer people will be willing to assume the role of caregiver in relation to a family member (Hünteler, & Mulder, 2020; Syse *et al.*, 2021). Both positive and negative effects of migration are reported by national studies in relation to dependant older family members. In Europe, Cheianu-Andrei *et al.* (2011) emphasize positive effects of the migration of adult children, in terms of increased possibilities to cover the costs of formal care of elderly parents left behind, while Böhme *et al.* (2015) reported better physical health of older parents. Antman (2010) concluded that migration of children has negative effects on physical and mental health of older parents left behind, in

Mexic. Thus, the need to care for ageing parents may cause the descendants to return.

In the case of transnational families with children, the separation of parents and their young children can harm the parent – child relationship (Dreby, 2007), and may cause migrant parents to return home. The few studies carried out so far on the impact of emigration on the quality of life of Romanians who went to work abroad show that (Mocanu *et al.*, 2020) a general increase in the quality of life of Romanian immigrants in Belgium, reflected in the financial situation and job satisfaction, access to quality medical and educational services, multiple leisure opportunities. However, there should be a research concern with the quality of family life (QoLF) of those who remained in the country (children, parents), considering all dimensions of QoLF (family interaction, emotional well-being, physical/material well-being, disability-related support), and here our exploratory study offers analysis elements that should be taken into account. From a political perspective, there are studies that indicate that families could be viewed as an important factor for attracting people to return to their origins (Gillespie *et al.*, 2022). Increasing the quality of family life by attracting parents who have gone to work abroad to their country of origin is a central element of return migration.

### *Research on Romanian migration*

Romanian diaspora is among the largest in the world and continues to grow (Dolea, 2021; Sandu, 2021). The exact number of people living abroad is difficult to estimate, but is generally accepted that „the migration phenomenon has transformed into an exodus” (Săniuță, & Jianu, 2022). Unfortunately, Romania does not have a national strategy to stimulate return migration and the reintegration of those who return. Several initiatives have been launched such as Diaspora Startup, ReThink Romania, Repatriot, etc., but these are disparate measures that are not included in a strategy.

Understanding the fundamentals of return decisions is important for formulating appropriate migration policies. Due to limited studies measuring Romanian migrants' tendency to return to their country, this phenomenon is difficult to be quantified. Return migration is challenging to measure because much of it is spontaneous and goes unrecorded, although official data exist on forced return and voluntary assisted return. Ciobanu (2015) highlights difficulties to measure return migration due to multiple experiences. In Romania, several studies have analysed the determinants, purpose, and effects of massive Romanian migration that began with the opening of borders in 1990 (Roman, & Voicu, 2010; Sandu, 2010). The first wave of migration was represented by ethnic migration (which appeared especially among ethnic Germans, but also among Jews or Hungarians).

Subsequently, temporary migration for work became predominant, increasing after the country's integration into the European Union. Simultaneously, illegal forms of migration flourished (Goschin *et al.*, 2009). Return migration has increased slightly amid the global economic crisis, and the destination countries preferred by Romanians are also deeply affected. However, the size of the phenomenon of return to the country of origin did not reach the expected dimensions, and Romania also faced difficulties generated by the crisis (Bărbulescu, 2009).

There is currently no clear evidence of the proportion of return migration in Romania, and it is difficult to make a correct estimate of the number of migrants returning permanently to the country, especially because of the difficulty in distinguishing between various forms of circular or temporary migration and return migration (Anghel, & Roman, 2021; Anghel *et al.*, 2016).

There are three main categories of factors that can directly or indirectly influence the decision of migrant workers to return to their country of origin (Roman, & Goschin, 2012): 1) personal attributes and characteristics of migrants (e.g., age, gender, level of education, ethnicity); 2) family situation; and 3) social, economic, and political factors.

Bonifazi and Paparusso's (2019) quantitative analysis indicated the factors that influence the return intentions of Romanian migrants living in Italy. According to this study, gender, age, level of education, employment status, having children living with them, and experience of discrimination in Italy are all predictors of return intentions.

Shima (2010) analysed the return migration of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants using data from a survey conducted by the World Bank. The author noted that better labour market status of migrants returning to the country is positively correlated with the intention to return permanently.

In a study on the return intentions of Romanian migrants, Hinks and Davies (2015) showed that a wage gap between the host country and the country of origin, investments in business, and investments in human capital in the host country, especially in fluent speaking of the language of that country, significantly reduces the likelihood of returning to Romania. Instead, sending remittances and investments in Romania increases the probability of return.

Ghiță *et al.* (2007) highlighted the fact that migrants returning to the country can bring important benefits for Romania, in terms of work experience, increased productivity, financial capital, and even new ideas in the technical field.

The reintegration process of migrants into their country of origin is not simple. Migrants are not always well informed about the rapid transformations that their country of origin is experiencing, even in the context of maintaining ties with family members or the community. In addition, the migrant returning to the country of origin after a greater number of years spent abroad is no longer the same, and his and society's expectations of him may be completely different (Vlase, 2011).



## Methodological approach

### *Research question and data source*

The main research questions aim to *provide information about the profile of Romanian workers in the United Kingdom* and to *identify the intentions of Romanian workers from United Kingdom (UK) to return to Romania*. To answer these research questions, authors used *qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews* with experts involved in the integration of Romanians in the UK, and *quantitative and qualitative data from an online survey* implemented in 2018 with Romanians who migrated to this country. For both research tools developed by the authors (semi-structured interview guide and questionnaire) the research topics were: (1) characteristics of current employment; (2) the labour mobility process; (3) the intention to return to the country; (4) factors that reduce external labour mobility. For this article, only the topics regarding labour mobility process and intention to return to the country were retained for analysis. The intention to return was measured as an answer to the question “*Since you left the country, have you ever had the intention of returning permanently to Romania to work?*”

### *Methods and sample*

The proposed exploratory research comprised two phases of implementation: (1) identification of starting sampling points in the survey with Romanian migrant workers in the UK by conducting semi-structured interviews with the experts, and (2) a Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) questionnaire survey among Romanian migrants in the UK.

In the selection of the experts participating in the semi-structured interviews, we started from the Romanian institutions in the UK with a role in the management of Romanian emigrants, adding other organizations from the non-governmental sector involved in advising Romanian emigrants. For the CAWI questionnaire, the authors assume the limitations given by the use of a non-probability sample for the investigation, especially through the influence of the socio-demographic profile of the people who answered the questionnaire, but consider that, in the absence of a data base with Romanians working in United Kingdom, which would have allowed the use of a probabilistic investigation sample, the proposed methodology with two implementation stages (interviews and survey) represents a solid solution for the exploratory study carried out. Other selection bias can be introduced by posting the questionnaire link on the social media page of the Romanian Embassy in the UK, the basic population being made up of Romanians from the UK who access the embassy's social media page. In selecting the Romanian Embassy as the institution on whose page the questionnaire link should be posted, the authors of the research focused on the role of the Embassy in the life of the Romanians

in the UK, that of maintaining the connection between the Romanian community in the UK and the Romanian state.

Participants in the semi-structured interviews were experts from the Romanian state, but also Romanian community leaders in the country of migration, people who have been involved in projects, or who have professional concerns about Romanians working in the UK: 2 experts from Romanian institutions in the UK (Romanian attaché on labour and social issues in the UK, Honorary Consul of Romania in Wales), 3 members of the organisations representing the interests of Romanians working in the UK, representatives of the religious organisations of the Romanian communities from the UK, and 2 experts from other institutions (e.g., universities) who have worked on projects, or who have professional concerns about Romanians working in the UK.

Between October 2 and October 15, 2018, seven people from the target group were interviewed through face-to-face online discussions. The existing methodological recommendations set in the scientific literature were followed (Austin, & Sutton, 2014; Guest *et al.*, 2013). The main selection criterion was the relevance of the investigation unit to the research objectives. In the case of our enquiry, the relevance of the investigation units was given by the information they had regarding the Romanian workers located in the territory of the UK.

The average duration of an interview was about one hour; all interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for the interpretation of the results. For the purpose of this study, only the responses of the interviewees regarding the intention to return to Romania were analysed. The questions focused on reasons that determined Romanian migrants' return, the importance of the family in making the decision to return, and factors with a decisive role in maintaining the status quo of emigrants at work.

In the second phase of the research, a survey questionnaire was developed using a non-probabilistic sample (a sample developed using both the snowball technique and voluntary sampling). The type of sample was proposed because of the lack of a sampling frame based on administrative data (a nominal administrative list with e-mail addresses of Romanian workers in the UK, so that the link to the CAWI questionnaire could be sent). This type of non-probabilistic sample is specific to exploratory research and excludes data representativeness. Sampling by the snowball technique involves identifying several people who meet the necessary criteria to be included in the study (in the case of our research, Romanians working in the UK), and then requesting them to recommend other people they know, who meet the selection criteria. The people identified in stage one were those who responded to the semi-structured interviews. In volunteering sampling, the sample is 'self-selected' by willing participants, following an announcement by the researcher. The link to the questionnaire for our research was available during the research on the social media page (*Facebook*) of the Romanian Embassy in the UK. The sample size was 211 respondents. The data collection period was

between October 15, 2018 and November 13, 2018. For the purpose of this study, information from the thematic section on the intention to return to the country was processed from the questionnaire.

Data collected from the online survey supplemented the information obtained from the interviews. Of the total respondents, the majority were women (60.2%), and those aged 25-29 years (26%), 35-39 years (23.6%), and 30-34 years (20.2%). More than half of those who completed the questionnaires using the CAWI technique had studies equal to or higher than the level of education and qualification ISCED 6 (bachelor's degree or equivalent) (Table 1).

*Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the Romanian workers in the UK, participating in the quantitative research*

Socio-demographic characteristics		%
Sex	Women	60.2
	Men	39.8
Age	Below 24 years	4.3
	25-29 years	26.0
	30-34 years	20.2
	35-39 years	23.6
	40-44 years	11.5
	45-49 years	4.8
	50-54 years	6.3
	55+ years	3.4
Education	Primary school/secondary school	3.3
	Vocational education	5.2
	High school	31.0
	Bachelor studies	37.6
	Master studies	20.0
	Doctoral studies	2.9

The majority of respondents declared occupations from the occupational groups of professionals (45.8%), technicians and associate professionals (14.2%), and service workers (12.9%). The highest percentage of participants in the CAWI survey was recorded by those who stated that before arriving in the UK, they were pupils/students in Romania (16%), followed by those who declared occupations from the occupational group science and engineering professionals (10.8%) and health professionals (7.7%), closely followed by those from the occupational group business and administration professionals (7.2%). Of the respondents, 4.1% had no occupation when they left their country.

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study, according to the research protocol developed.

## **Results and discussion**

### *Profile of Romanian workers in the United Kingdom*

The semi-structured interviews with experts have revealed that the main reasons related to the mobility process towards the UK are connected to the low economic and social prospective of labour market, translated in the lack of jobs within the regions/communities of origin, the low incomes associated with available jobs, and the lack of opportunities in all spheres of life. Romanian migrants indicated similar reasons for living the country, but from an individual approach: the lack of perspectives (25.5%), a better wage (24.8%), better working conditions (14.3%), the lack of jobs in the country (10.5%), a better educational system (6.9%), family and friends that are already in the country of destination (6.5%), other reasons (11.4%). Therefore, the factors that determine the migration are known at the level of policy makers and NGOs, but still not overcome. However, previous literature on Romanian migrants (Ciobanu, 2015; Ciobanu, 2010; Sandu, 2000) highlighted the importance of social networks in the migration decision.

Our qualitative research revealed a number of key factors that lead to integration in the destination country, as confirmed in previous literature (De Haas, & Fokkema, 2011): (1) language skills, (2) digital skills, (3) migration channels, (4) the work experience (including that acquired in the destination country, which facilitates access to the social protection system of the destination country), and (5) openness to a totally different cultural context compared to the country of origin.

*‘Integration is quite difficult for those who do not have language skills, because if they have a job and then lose it, it is very difficult if they do not come through a chain migration, like family, friends, as it happened in Italy’* (Romanian representative in the UK).

The lack of language skills keeps the migrants in a trap of low-skilled and low paid jobs, and complicates the integration into the British society. In general, the migration channel – through relatives, friends, etc. or individually, facilitate the process to find a job in direct correlation with the level of education and professional qualification of the person migrating to the UK. Some of the participants to semi-structured interviews consider that in the case of those with higher or postgraduate studies, finding a job is rather done through the social network to which they have access, since not all jobs are made public, but in all cases, finding a job is facilitated by having the necessary qualifications and command of the English language. Previous experience acquired in the country can be important, depending on the field of activity: in the field of construction, the experience gained in Romania is

an important factor that determines a rapid advance in the profession and an easy integration on the labour market.

As the job implies a higher level of education, only the work experience gained in the country is no longer sufficient, and it is necessary that it to be proven in the cultural, economic and social context of the country of destination. Thus it is explained why, for the academic field, the importance of the experience in Great Britain, compared to the previous one in the country, was pointed out during the interviews. According to the opinions expressed by some respondents, previous work experience must be accompanied by a minimum of experience in the same field in Great Britain, even if the experience in question can only be a form of volunteering:

*‘They adapt, but they don’t integrate [adults]. Children integrate because they spend most of their time in school. And they don’t have so many prejudices and they don’t have the traumas, so to speak, of their parents’* (Representative of a non-governmental organization expressing the interests of Romanian Women in the UK)

In accordance to the semi-structured interviews, in direct connexion with the factors that are affecting integration, the Romanian workers in the UK could be grouped into four major groups, characterised by drivers and by barriers to integration:

- *Higher education workers* who have a well-defined career path, reaching the new country as a result of a selection process for employment. Usually, persons from this cluster integrate easily into the new country, possess a good knowledge of the language, and have digital skills that facilitate their access to IT structures on which the UK’s social, health, education, and labour market protection systems are based;
- *Workers with higher and secondary education* who left Romania to ensure a better standard of living for themselves and their families. They turn to networks already consolidated by Romanians who have previously left the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the process of their integration into the new country is mediated by the members of these networks;
- *Low-skilled workers with problems ensuring daily living for themselves and their families* in Romania, generally recruited by people of the same nationality who act as mediators in finding a job in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. These workers seem to be the most vulnerable to exploitation. In their case, it is not possible to talk about social integration, the main barrier being limited knowledge or lack of language. Another barrier to integration is the lack of digital skills, which limits access to information on jobs and social protection systems;
- *Persons from marginalised groups in Romania* (e.g., homeless people, Roma people, young people who have left the child protection system and have not found a job), in which case we cannot speak of integration within the

British society, but rather an integration of necessity in groups of persons being in the same situation in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The integration process is difficult because of cultural and religious diversity, as there are certain expectations of Romanians regarding the society in which they are looking for a job. In certain domains (construction, for example), Romanians choose to live with other Romanians, speak more their native language, watch media programs in Romanian, and all these things help them preserve their cultural identity, ease the adaptation and slow the integration into a different society with different regulations and expectations. According to the qualitative research, most of the Romanian emigrants can be located mainly in the London area, in the East, South East, and ‘The Midlands’ (counties in the central part of England).

The survey conducted among Romanian migrants pointed that most of those who were employed at the time of the survey were women (66.9%), compared to men (33.1%). In addition, the majority of those employed at the time of the survey had a high level of education (65.6%). The self-employed/authorized natural persons at the time of the survey were mostly men (78.8%) and more than half of them had an average level of education (66.7%). At the time of the field research, most employees had contracts on indefinite duration (86.6%) (Table 2).

*Table 2. Employment status of the Romanian workers in the UK participating in the quantitative research*

	Women	Men	Low level of education	Medium level of education	High level of education	19-34 years old	35-54 years old	55+ years old
Registered unemployed persons	33.3	66.7	33.3		66.7	33.3	33.3	33.3
Employee	66.9	33.1	3.8	30.6	65.6	53.9	43.5	2.6
Worker without a contract		100.0		100.0			100.0	
Self-employed/authorized natural persons	21.2	78.8		66.7	33.3	45.5	51.5	3.0
Employer	75.0	25.0		25.0	75.0	25.0	50.0	25.0
Inactive person	91.7	8.3		33.3	66.7	45.5	54.5	

Official data on migrants point to retail, construction, and manufacturing, as main industries where Romanians and Bulgarians were working in UK, in 2020 (The Migration Observatory, 2022). Taking into account the results of our research,

we may assume that Romanian migrants leave the country in search of a better life, and they strive to adapt (not to integrate) considering that they will eventually return. Thus, the main reason for short-term international migration in case of EU-2 countries (Romania and Bulgaria) was employment (Office for National Statistics, 2021b), while those that migrated for employment without having a job were the most of them (OECD, 2019). In 2016, almost 40% of the Romanian migrants were living in London region, 13% in South East region, and another 13% in East Midlands region (OECD, 2019). Avramescu and Wisniowski (2021) point attention to the different problematic aspects related to the measurement of immigration of Romanians to UK, as data regarding migrants in UK are compiled from several administrative databases. Ciobanu (2015) also point that statistics on the exact number of Romanians abroad are unclear, this being the reason that a qualitative research could provide useful insights.

### *The return migration intention*

Different views about the return intentions of Romanian migrants emerged from the qualitative and quantitative research. Key reasons that limit the return intentions are:

- *From qualitative research:* the lack of policy measures and programs that capitalize the Romanians' experience within the communities left behind and thus creating opportunities to return, the lack of jobs and the poor quality of public services;
- *From quantitative research:* the unfavourable economic and political situation in the country, deficiencies of the education and health care systems.

As the studies are pointing, there is currently no clear evidence of the proportion of return migration in Romania, and it is difficult to make a correct estimation of the number of migrants returning permanently to the country, especially because of the difficulty in distinguishing between various forms of circular and return migration (Anghel *et al.*, 2016). Some of the migrants have returned after the 2009.

The results of our qualitative research show that although the number of those addressing the UK Romanian Embassy has reduced, this seems to be associated with a phenomenon of diminishing the flow of migration to the UK in the context of Brexit.

## **Key reasons that limit the return intentions as emerged from qualitative and quantitative research**

Participants to semi-structured interviews rather indicate an intention to formalize the residence abroad, while the intention to return faded over time, due to insignificant progresses in Romania. They appreciated that policy measures and programs that capitalise on the experience of Romanians within the communities

where they left, creating opportunities for them inside those communities, could favour the return to the country:

*'If the emphasis would be on the skills they have acquired here and on everything they can give back to the community where they left [the Romanian community], I think it would be important, because they would feel valued' (Representative of a non-governmental organization).*

In-depth information was revealed by the Romanian migrants who participated to the quantitative research. Only a third (26.5%) of the Romanian respondents to the online survey declared that they ever intended to return to their country of origin after they left. Of these, more than three quarters (76.8%) did not pursue this intention.

Key factors that limited the return intentions as emerged from the quantitative research are: the unfavourable economic and political situation in the country (46.5%), the low level of wages offered by employers (20.9%), better access to working conditions (wages, job stability) in the UK compared to those in their country (11.6%), lack of jobs in their country (7%), and aspects related to the education of children enrolled in the British educational system, which were considered better than those in the country of origin (4.7%). 23.2% of those who intended to return to their country of origin pursued this decision, but later returned to the UK, mainly because of the impossibility of finding a job that would ensure an adequate level of income to allow the respondent to support the family (46.2%). However, the vast majority of respondents did not consider the possibility of returning to their country (73.5%). Previous studies (Caro Carretero *et al.*, 2018; Roman, & Goschin, 2012) highlighted personal, economic and contextual reason that determine the decision to return.

Almost a third of the participants to the quantitative research (70.9% of respondents) do not want to ever return to their country of origin. 22.8% intend to return permanently in the next 5 years, and 6.3% intend to return to the country in the next 3 years. In the case of those who expressed the intention to return in the short and medium term (in the next 3 years, respectively in the next 5 years), the main reason would be the possibility of finding a job that would provide the respondent with an adequate income to support the family (45%). Another reason would be to return to those family members they left behind (35%). On the other hand, those who do not want to ever return to the country, pointed the corruption, excessive bureaucracy, the mentality - 21.2%, respectively the lack of an efficient educational system that offers the possibility of educating children in order to prepare for a job (21.2%). Among other reasons pointed are: 19.2% believe that the healthcare system in Romania is deficient, 13% are convinced that they will not find a job, 10.3% no longer have any family member they could return to, 3.4% already have family and friends in Great Britain, 3.4% consider that they would have a lower standard of living than in Great Britain, if they were to return to the country (Table 3).



Table 3. Reasons for the return intentions of the Romanian workers in the UK participating in the quantitative research

Reasons to return	%	Reasons not to return	%
Finding a job able to provide the income to support my family	45.0	The low performance of the educational system in Romania	21.2
Family reunification	35.0	The overall deficiencies of the state (corruption, birocracy etc.)	21.2
Reduction of corruption	5.0	The health system in Romania is deficient	19.2
Health problems	3.3	I won't find a job	13.0
Integration problems in the UK generated by Brexit	1.7	My family has reunited in UK	10.3
Other reasons	10.0	Other reasons	15.1

The highest intention to return is recorded among respondents who were registered unemployed at the time of the survey (66.7%), followed by housewives (36.4%). Employers and employees register the lowest rates of the intention to return to the country (25% and 27.7%, respectively). A research conducted among Romanian migrants in Italy, pointed to different factors that mostly influence the return migration (Bonifazi, & Paparusso, 2019).

In a study on the return intentions of Romanian migrants, Hinks and Davies (2015) suggest that policies that increase productivity and wage levels in our country may encourage migrant workers to return home. In addition, policies that facilitate the start-up and development of profitable businesses in Romania, as well as the improvement of the business environment, could cause migrants to return. Recent studies (Croitoru, 2020) also suggest that policies supporting entrepreneurship initiatives could favour the return of Romanian migrants.

## Systemic changes to stimulate the return of Romanian migrants

Some measures could be implemented to stimulate the return of Romanian migrants:

- Improving the access to public services (especially in rural areas);
- Family connections;
- The economic development translated in higher wages and more available jobs;
- The adoption of other European countries good practices in stimulating the return of migrants.

## Improved access to public services

Qualitative research pointed that an important aspect that could stimulate the return of Romanian migrants is related to access to quality public services that provide them with security (health and educational systems) and predictability (educational and social protection systems).

*'Having jobs in that area of living for those who are desperate would be an option if they could find these jobs in the community that would allow them to support the family with those earnings. [...] For those who are leaving the country in searching for a better life, for better public services, not necessarily a job, I think all services from health to education need to be improved...'. (Romanian representative in the UK).*

*'A more active economic market, a more active labour force...'. (Representative of a non-governmental organization).*

## Family connections

Family still plays an important role in the transformation of the intention of mobility/migration into actual behaviour, an aspect otherwise mentioned in profile studies (De Haas *et al.*, 2015; Snel *et al.*, 2015). Although in most cases the motivation to leave the country was related to a better wage, the experience of effective social systems in the country of destination enriched the experience of Romanian migrants, and set them new comparison benchmarks. That is why an integrated policy perspective is needed to emphasize both the family and the individual, when considering the reduction of work migration. It should also be taken into account that these integrated measures/policies will rather have an effect on some categories of migrants (categories two and three in the taxonomy proposed in section 4.1). Although few studies (Mocanu *et al.*, 2020) indicate an increase in the quality of life for the Romanians who left the country, there are no studies to measure the quality of family life of those who remained in the country. All dimensions of the quality of family life are affected, some in a positive sense (the material dimension), others in a negative sense (family interaction, emotional well-being (Matei, & Bobârnat, 2022). In the context of migration, the cultural model of provision of care is changing (Iossifova, 2020). Redistribution of roles and tasks between family members also may lead to intra-family conflicts, in case of elderly left behind (Antman, 2012). Limited coverage of rural areas with long-term care services remains a problem, especially in certain national contexts. In countries with high migration flows of young people, important shares of older residents in rural and urban areas become unable to carry out daily activities independently (Ghența *et al.*, 2022). There were underlined important aspects related to migration from Romania and Bulgaria, as demand for care either provided in residential

settings or at home has increased due to aging and migration (Ghența *et al.*, 2021; Iossifova, 2020).

## **The economic development**

With regard to other aspects that need changes in Romania so that Romanians no longer leave the country to find a job, the participants in the semi-structured interviews felt that there should be available jobs in the communities where they come from, where they have a family, and where the family solidarity networks are created, which are still very important in rural Romania. Professional perspectives offered by the Romanian labour market could have a positive contribution to the return decision and the workforce needs to develop a long-term perspective of the profession. In direct correlation with the labour market, changes in the education system, especially vocational and technical education, could contribute to the reduction of external labour mobility.

The interviewed participants considered progress concerning wage earnings to be effective in stopping migration flow in certain areas, such as healthcare services:

*'I think the change of legislation ... I think that in a way, it had an effect, at least on those who worked in Romania, they were thinking of leaving and now they have decided to stay, even if they were planning to leave, especially in the case of those working in the healthcare sector'* (Romanian university staff person in the UK).

Although in most cases the motivation for leaving was related to the need to acquire a higher income, integration within a country with efficient social systems enriched their experience and set new benchmarks for comparison. Therefore, an integrated policy perspective that focuses on both the family and the individual is needed to lower the phenomenon of labour migration. It should also be noted that these integrated measures and policies will affect certain categories of migrants (categories two and three of the taxonomy proposed in this study).

The quantitative research pointed to similar views among Romanian migrants. Respondents to the online survey (85.5%) believed that policy measures to reduce the external mobility of the labour force were necessary. The first three areas that required interventions were adequate pay for work (87.3%), improvements in the health system (68.2%), and the educational system (67.1%). The social protection system (which includes both the social security system and the social assistance system represented by social services and social assistance benefits) was also considered deficient (48% of respondents mentioned the need for interventions in this area). Among those who mentioned other issues, 47.3% mentioned the need for measures to reduce the level of corruption and increase transparency in decision-making. Similar reasons to return have been reported by Gherghina and Ploeanu (2020) in case of Romanian migrants in Spain. Without a doubt, the labour migration, the shortages of health and social assistance staff (e.g., lack of

qualified home caregivers) negatively impact the quality of life of older family members left at home (Tessier *et al.*, 2022; Zimmer *et al.*, 2022), and the amount and quality of care received (Anghel *et al.*, 2016).

### **Good practices transferability**

A rethinking of measures from an integrated policy perspective could be more effective given other countries' example in encouraging its migrant citizens to return:

*'In Poland, they are already returning home, I understand that they have some measures and maybe these measures should be seen, the migration has registered a negative growth' (Romanian representative in the UK).*

The results of our research support the diversity of explanatory theories of return migration (Arango, 2000; Borjas, 1989; Carling, & Pettersen, 2014; Constant, & Massey, 2002; De Haas, & Fokkema, 2011). The phenomenon of migration/return migration involves a complex interaction of economic, social, and cultural factors (Iossifova, 2020; Maastricht University, 2018).

The exploratory approach of the study, the only one possible in the absence of databases with Romanian workers in the UK, can be seen as a methodological limitation of the study. However, the obtained results offer an empirical basis, in the context of the lack of information on this subject for a target group. Therefore, the availability sample of the CAWI survey does not reproduce the gender structure recorded by the official statistics, and it is not possible to establish representative data, as specified in the methodological section.

### **Conclusions**

The return migration is a decision influenced by a multitude of personal factors and related to the characteristics of country of origin and country of migration. Studies conducted to date (Anghel *et al.*, 2016; Goschin *et al.*, 2009) indicate that there is no clear evidence of the proportion of return migration in Romania, making it difficult to make a correct estimate of the number of those returning to the country permanently, especially because of the difficulty in distinguishing between different forms of circular and return migration. The better labour market status of migrants returning to the country is positively correlated with the intention to return permanently.

In our study, research findings from the semi-structured interviews with experts and the survey among Romanian migrants have revealed that the main reasons related to the mobility process towards the UK are related to the low economic and

social prospective of labour market. The integration process is difficult because is related to language and digital skills, the work experience, and the ability to adapt to a different cultural context. The intention to migrate results mainly from the existence of differences in living standards manifested by a difference in the price of labour (wages) between the country of origin and the country of destination. The factors that caused the migration block the return process, as long as no changes have occurred in Romania, in the sense of improving the wage conditions on the labour market, and the access to quality public services, especially in the case of higher education workers, who have a well-defined career path, reaching the new country as a result of a selection process for employment, and in the case of workers with higher and secondary education, who left Romania to ensure a better standard of living for themselves and their families.

For low-skilled workers with problems ensuring daily living for themselves and their families, mainly the lack of the possibility of decent remuneration for work in Romania is a factor that influences the intention to return.

The lack of measures and programs to capitalize the experience of the Romanian migrants was pointed out in semi-structured interviews as a factor that limit the return. The overall unfavourable economic and political situation in the country, deficiencies of the education and health care systems were other factors mentioned by the participants to the online survey.

Connections with people in the host country (the presence of a life partner or parents) play an important role in the return decision. Social networks represent an important factor that influence the decision to migrate, as Ciobanu (2015) and Sandu (2000) have already documented. The probability of returning to the country of origin is higher for people living with their partner in the destination country than for people without a partner. The ties with the country of origin increase the likelihood of return. Maintaining connections with relatives in Romania by sending remittances has a positive correlation with the intention to return. The results also indicate that available jobs in the communities where they come from, where they have a family, and where family solidarity networks are created are important drivers of return migration.

Given the important role of the family in society, the policymakers should develop family policies to stimulate the retention of young families in their country of origin, considering the experience of other European countries with high rates of migration. The measures implemented so far, for the Romanian migrants to return to their country, have not proved to be effective, and more productive measures, such as those illuminated in our study could yield promising outcomes. Increasing the quality of family life by attracting parents who have gone to work abroad to their country of origin is a central element of return migration. It is necessary for the quality of family life in the country of origin to increase so that those who went to work outside the borders of the country return to their country of origin.

Improvements of the overall public services and ensuring a sustainable economic development may determine the Romanians to return.

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