

# The Romanian American Dream: Permanent Migration, Identity and Integration of Romanian Immigrants in the United States

**Eliza Markley\***

*Georgia Institute of Technology, United States*

**Darina Lepadatu\*\***

*Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, United States*

**Abstract:** *International migration is one of the most spectacular social changes that affected post-communist Romania. Despite a growing body of research on Romanian migration to Europe, there is a huge gap in the literature on Romanian immigration to the United States. In this paper, we reveal the dynamics of permanent migration to the US, how does the American dream look like for the Romanian immigrants, what are their motives for migration and their process of acculturation in the US. Two sets of theories were used. The first one focuses on the push and pull factors that contribute to Romanian migration to the United States, and the second one looks at Berry's (1997) four stages of acculturation. Based on in-depth interviews with 33 Romanian immigrants in the United States and hundreds of hours of participant observation of Romanian communities in Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, the findings emphasize Romanians' choice for integration in American society and the long term and achievement orientation for their migration. The study results also stress the positive influence of English proficiency, strong community support, young age at arrival, and length of residence on Romanian immigrants' integration in the US. The Romanian American dream, grounded on career success and family stability, is the symbol used to describe the complex equation of high education, high-skill occupational status and low divorce that contributes to the successful integration of Romanian immigrants into the American society.*

**Keywords:** Romanian migration; permanent migration; identity; acculturation; integration; United States.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Migrația românească; migrație permanentă; identitate; aculturație; integrare; SUA.

## Introduction

International migration is one of the most spectacular social changes that affected post-communist Romania. During the communist times, the Romanians were not allowed to travel freely to Western countries. This interdiction to travel made Romanians to idealize the style and

quality of life of capitalist societies. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, a massive number of Romanians decided to establish their permanent residence abroad (permanent migration) or to work for several years and bring savings back home to enjoy a better lifestyle (temporary migration) (Sandu, 2006). Romania's population, for instance, decreased from 23 million citizens

---

\* Georgia Institute of Technology, Sam Nun School of International Affairs, United States. E-mail: eliza.markley@inta.gatech.edu.

\*\* Kennesaw State University, Dep. of Sociology and Criminal Justice, 402 Bartow Ave, Kennesaw, GA 30144, United States. E-mail: dlepadat@kennesaw.edu.

in 1989 to below 20 million in 2015 (Romanian Institute of Statistics, 2015) mostly because of international migration. Over the past 25 years, approximately 2,5 million Romanians left their country of origin in cycles of temporary migration and most of them have located in Italy (48%), Spain (34%), Germany (7%), UK (4%), Hungary (3%) and other countries (Romanian Institute of Statistics, 2014).

As a destination for permanent migration, the US had always been one of the most idealized and preferred host countries for Romanians. According to the 2010 US Census, about 500,000 citizens of Romanian ancestry currently live in the US. However, census data cannot provide reliable estimates for foreign-born populations, since immigrants are a transient population that typically does not own their own homes. For instance, the website of the Romanian Embassy in Washington, D.C. estimates that, accounting for the American children of the Romanian immigrants, the overall Romanian population living in the US reaches more than one million citizens.

Following the end of the Cold War, Romanian migration can be categorized into four main phases (Baldwin-Edwards, 2007). Between 1990 and 1993, ethnic emigration is paralleled by political and poverty motivated migration. In just one year, in 1992, there were 116,000 Romanian applications for political asylum to the major Western refugee hosting countries, mostly United States, France, Germany and Italy (Ethnobarometer, 2004). The 1994-1996 period is described by low levels of economic migration, ethnic migration, and asylum seeking. In the following five years, several trends develop at the same time. Migration to the US and Canada increases while illegal, circular migration to European countries emerges, human and sex trafficking grows (Balkan route), and return migration becomes more prevalent (OECD, 2010). Before Romania joined European Union in 2007, the Romanian migrants preferred to travel as false tourists and work temporarily illegally in Western Europe (Baldwin-Edward, 2007). As EU citizens since 2007, Romanians

fully enjoy their rights to travel freely to EU countries and have engaged in various forms of temporary migration, primarily to Italy and Spain, and less to United States and Canada, countries that have rather time consuming and detailed procedures for permanent migration.

Since the United States is fundamentally founded on a tradition of migration, *the American dream* stands as a symbol of freedom and prosperity where citizens can achieve their full potential and happiness (Truslow Adams, 1931). To this day, US is still the country that accepts the highest number of immigrants per year (more than 1 million) in the world, amounting to a total higher than 40 million foreign-born, equivalent to 13% of its 320 million population (US Census, 2015). The purpose of this project is to offer unique insights into the Romanian American dream, meaning to understand Romanians' motivations to migrate to the United States, and to explore how they and their families adapt to the American culture. The study focuses on the challenges, solutions and facets of the acculturation process that Romanian immigrants experience in the US. The study is significant on many levels. First, there is a considerable gap in research on Romanian migration to the US; in fact, with only a notable exception (Bradatan and Kulcsar, 2013), we were not able to identify prior scientific studies published in peer reviewed journals on Romanian diaspora living in the United States. Second, considering that international migration is one of the most important social changes of the last two decades, this is a topic that informs not only the Romanian immigration, but also American as well as international immigration. Finally, the study is relevant for the general audience as it focuses on the integration and acculturation strategies of European immigrants in the US. The theoretical framework of this project is based on Massey and Taylor's (1998) theory of relative deprivation as a social factor to influence individuals' migration network, theory supported by Massey, Durand and Malone (2002). Additionally, the study uses acculturation theories and the stages

of immigrants' adaptation to the new cultural environment of the host country (Berry, 2003).

### **Migration Theories – Why Do Romanians Migrate?**

The Americans would answer: “to keep up with the Joneses”, or in academic terms, due to relative deprivation. According to Massey and Taylor (1998) and the new economics of migration theory, non-migrant families constantly compare their situation with those of migrants abroad. In this sense, they are induced the desire to migrate to other countries in search for a better life and opportunities; however, the theory fails to explain why the early migrants started their journeys in the first place.

World systems and other neo-Marxist theories could explain the start of migration with the opening of the Romanian borders after the fall of communism, and the penetration of its economy by stronger and more powerful economies. Portes and Walton (1981) argue that the structural imbalance between states is conducive of labor migration and recruitment. Piore (1979) and his theory of segmented labor market consider that international migration is the effect of the labor demand from the developed countries. Native workers avoid employment in secondary sector, due to the instability of jobs, low salaries and low status; consequently, immigrants become the perfect candidate for these markets, as the low salaries and prestige in the host society translate into high wages and prestige in their home countries.

A key factor in promoting and sustaining migration are the support networks (Morawska, 1988). They are defined as sets of interpersonal ties that link migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through the bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin (Massey, 1988). Networks, with their abilities to offer jobs to newcomers, make migration a reliable and risk-free economic resource (Taylor, 1986). During the first stage of Romanian emigration (1990-1995) only 22% of those who left for work abroad received help

from someone, the others relying on the help of human resources agencies of the host countries. As the number of migrants increased, personal networks expanded, and support agencies lost their importance. Therefore, between 1996 and 2001, 40% of the Romanian migrants received help to leave, and after 2001, their percentage reached 60% (Sandu, 2006).

### *Acculturation Theories*

Given the gap in the literature, it is important to understand how Romanian families adapt to the US and the problems they encounter during the process of acculturation. According to Berry, Trimble and Olmeda (1986), acculturation is a process of adaptation to a new culture by adopting its values, beliefs, attitudes, behavior, and practices. However, not all immigrants, even coming from the same culture, experience acculturation in the same way.

In this sense, Berry (2003) points at different types and stages of acculturation. The types of acculturation – voluntary, involuntary, temporary and permanent – affect significantly migrants' experiences in the new culture. Individuals may react to the process of acculturation very differently, based on what strategies they pursue to adjust to the new environment (Berry apud Ward, 2007). These strategies further impact the stage of migrants' acculturation – separation, marginalization, integration, or assimilation (Berry, 2003). In the separation stage, individuals avoid interaction or identification with the host culture, while maintaining a close connection with and reaffirmation of their native culture. Marginalization refers to individuals distancing themselves from both host and home cultures. Finally, while integration involves a bicultural orientation that successfully blends dimensions of both cultures, assimilation means giving up one's culture in favor of the host culture.

Kim, Lujan, and Dixon (1998) argue that acculturation is not a linear process. The interaction between the stranger and the host culture is reciprocal, affecting both the immigrants and the locals (Lepadatu, Stephens

and Lepadatu, 2009); however, not equally. Immigrants in the United States face profound identity changes, while the American cultural environment is gradually infused with new ethnic habits, holiday customs or foods.

### ***Romanians' Acculturation in the US***

The Romanian migration to the US can be divided into two major groups: the Romanian immigrants who immigrated before and after 1990. If most of the Romanian immigrants arrived as political and religious refugees in the US before 1990, family reunification, Diversity Visa Lottery and education and research are major ports of entry for Romanian migrants into the American society after 1990. Many Romanians are coming into the US as students and then decide to continue their careers in the US, undergoing positive professional transformations and identity changes (Lepadatu, 2010, 2012). For instance, approximately 100 Romanians earn a doctorate degree in the US every year and more Romanian researchers/academics decide to work in the US than in other European countries (Bradatan and Kulcsar, 2013). It is also legendary that the second language spoken at Microsoft is Romanian, due to the high influx of Romanian software engineers who migrated to the western US coast (Agerpress, 2015).

Consequently, contemporary Romanian migration to US can be labeled, primarily, as permanent high-skilled migration, whereas the migration to European countries is predominantly based on temporary low-skilled migration. For instance, Romanian migrants in the US are more educated than the national average for both US and Romania. According to US Census data, approximately 36% of Romanian migrants to US have at least a bachelor's degree while 21% do not have a high school diploma, compared with 7% of Romanian immigrants with a bachelor's degree and 47% with no high school diploma migrating to Italy (Bradatan and Kulcsar, 2013). The attraction of the high skilled professionals into the US is obviously a result

of friendly immigration policies adopted in the United States, starting with the automatic US citizenship granted to immigrant children (*jus soli*), but also by offering a high quota of work visas to persons with extraordinary ability or achievement, demonstrated by sustained national or international acclaim, to work in their field of expertise (O1 visas) or professionals in specialty occupations such as architecture, engineering, mathematics, physical sciences, social sciences, medicine and health, education, business specialties, accounting, law, theology, and the arts – H1B visas – (US Embassy to Romania, 2015). The H1B visas for research and higher education are unlimited, which led to a high influx of more than 4,000 Romanian faculty and students attending the US universities (Embassy of Romania to Washington, D.C., 2015). These short-term employment contracts then pave for Romanian professionals the way to permanent residency and naturalization in the US society.

The strategy that the Romanian immigrants adopt to become a part of the new host culture depends partly on the attitudes they have toward acculturation, but also on the attitudes that host country displays toward them. However, the literature distinguishes a few factors that have an impact on acculturation, such as social support, age, length of residence in the host country, level of education, English fluency, and gender.

For a collectivist culture such as Romania, the family, friends, church and close social circle provide a significant source of emotional support for Romanians coping with the challenges of acculturation (Hofstede, 2001). Belonging to a strong community promotes the assimilation process (Zhou, 2004) and alleviates the acculturative stress associated with migration (Noh and Kaspar, 2004). Moreover, the effects of belonging to a community stretch over to the second generation, helping the immigrant youth to stay connected with their traditional culture (Feliciano, 2001). For instance, *The South Florida Sun Sentinel* (2003) published an article describing how important the Christian Orthodox church is for the Romanian immigrant communities in the US. Religious services

help to preserve the national identity, as well as to provide language training for the second generation of Romanian migrants. Therefore, the Romanian churches are crucial elements of preserving Romanian culture and a sense of community for the Romanians living far away from home.

Noteworthy, because most of the prior sociological research focused on Romanian migration refers to their temporary – sometimes illegal – emigration to Europe, the findings show an informal Romanian community that is weak, less permeable, less efficient (Sandu, 2006). Emigration to Spain or Italy became a strict individual experience in which the solutions to the problems of acculturation are found at random. The migration networks, essential support for the integration, witness the reduction in and the dissolution of the networks by their over-sizing and over-saturation (Sandu, 2006).

Besides religion and social networks, several other factors influence the acculturation of immigrants in host countries. First, gender could strongly impact the success of the acculturation process. According to Sam (apud Choi, 2009), adolescent girls with immigrant backgrounds in Norway scored higher on a few items of mental health than the boys with same background. This led Sam to conclude that girls acculturate easier than the boys to new environment and cultural changes.

Second, length of residence and education in the host country correlate positively with the level of acculturation (Oh et al., 2002). Moreover, having a bicultural orientation may prevent acculturative problems and increase individual's chances for success in the host country (Trueba apud Choi, 2009). Gong and colleagues (apud Choi, 2009) found that age at arrival in the host country also determines the acculturation results, with the younger ones having a lower level of ethnic identity and a higher rate of acculturation success.

Another factor with a critical impact on acculturation process is individual's proficiency in English. Research concluded that fluency in local language broaden the network and ties of

the immigrants. Forty percent of Romanians who know Spanish very well report that they spend their free time with Spaniards often and very often, comparing to only 18% of Romanians who know Spanish well (Sandu, 2009). Furthermore, English proficiency facilitates immigrants' assimilation (Yeh, 2003), their acculturation (Bhugra apud Choi, 2009), induces less stress-related problems (Oh et al., 2002), and increases the sense of ethnic identity.

## Research Methods

This research study explores the reasons why Romanian participants decided to leave Romania and chose United States as the destination of their migration. Further, it looks at how factors such as networks, language, education, and identity influenced Romanians' adaptation to the new cultural environment. The study tries to find patterns that link those factors with Romanians' level of satisfaction and perceived achievement with their new life in United States. At the same time, the paper emphasizes the values and traditions that Romanians gave up to, as well as those maintained as part of their new identity.

The research used a qualitative field research method, consisting of 60 minutes long, one on one in-depth interviews with 33 Romanian immigrants in the United States. The majority of interviews were conducted in the metropolitan Atlanta area in the state of Georgia, while others were conducted in the states of New York, Michigan, Kentucky, Florida, California and South Dakota. Although we have digitally recorded, transcribed and coded only 33 interviews at this point, this study is based on hundreds of hours of informal interviews and participant observation of the largest Romanian communities in the US (Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco). We have collected data at places of gathering (Sunday church service, Romanian festivals or other social events, such as christenings, weddings and funerals) over a period of 14 years. These ethnographic methods allowed the researchers to personally engage in direct, face-to-face

social interaction with Romanians in their natural setting. Ethnographic research is also ideal for examining the micro-level social world of Romanians, get a close-up look, and develop an insight of their subculture in the realm of the American dominant culture. The in-depth interview is the most adequate research method to record the deep personal stories of immigration, for it offers a comprehensive perspective of Romanians' acculturation process. It also allows the researcher to recognize nuances of attitudes and behavior that might escape observation, if different methods are used.

As native Romanian immigrants, we were able to understand from "inside" the behaviors, attitudes, and values of participants. As insiders, we had the advantages of knowing the Romanian diaspora communities intimately, placing our analysis in a broader social context, had greater in-depth knowledge on the Romanian norms, customs and traditions and higher cultural competence. Cultural proximity to your subjects has obviously its disadvantages: lack of objectivity, taking for granted some aspects while ignoring others due to overfamiliarity (Smyth, 2005). While working in a team of researchers had increased the intercoding reliability and objectivity in the data analysis, we have relied on the following innovative sampling technique to generate a more representative sample as possible, thus increasing the objectivity in the various stages of the research design.

### *Sampling*

Due to the qualitative design of the study, we used a non-probability sampling method. The participants were selected through purposive or judgmental sampling of Romanian immigrants who were residents in metropolitan areas with large Romanian communities. It is almost impossible to create a random sample of Romanians living in America since there are no lists or directory of this population, and no other method to locate Romanians other than going to the places where they regularly meet. In order to minimize our own selection bias, we

have asked our American students, colleagues and neighbors to recruit Romanian immigrants from their own communities for our study through a snowball referral procedure (friends of friends). Consequently, we have deliberately not recruited study participants from our own Romanian networks, but relied instead on the use of American informants who have recruited Romanian immigrants. Thus, the sample included a widely diverse pool of occupations, age, educational background and religion.

The sample was gender balanced and included ages ranging from 20 to 76 years old. Two thirds of participants were Romanians that have acquired the US citizenship, a third were green card holders and the sample did not include any illegal immigrants. While undocumented immigrants exist in any ethnic community in the US, the percentage of Romanian illegal immigrants is very small given the many rigid barriers of access to US. In any chance, we intentionally did not ask questions about the participants' legal status and none of them self-disclosed as being illegal immigrants. The study participants' level of education ranged from high school to PhD. To be noted that approximately 24% of participants were high school graduates, 42% college graduates, while 30% were holding Masters and PhD degrees. In terms of marital status, 30% of participants were younger than 30 years old and mostly single, while the majority of the sample was between 31-40 years old, married and with two children on average. Only a small fraction of the sample included divorced (2) and widowed participants (2). The occupations of Romanian immigrants varied widely from occupations requiring only high school education (waitresses, chefs, secretaries, animal trainers, maintenance personnel, truck drivers, stay-at-home parents etc.) to graduate and professional training (engineers, priests, doctors, lawyers, college professors, graduate students, marketing directors, nurses, media experts, accountants, graphic designers etc.). The majority of the participants were practicing the Christian Orthodox religion, but the sample also included individuals belonging to the

Catholic, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist or Jehovah's Witnesses faith.

### ***Interview and Participant Observation Procedure***

The interviews were conducted based on a systematic interview guide. The interview dealt with five topical areas: (1) demographic and other background characteristics, (2) immigration story, (3) life style and acculturation, including questions about factors which helped or hindered Romanians' acculturation, and satisfaction with life, (4) identity, and (5) relation with the home country.

The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face in churches, at individuals' houses, at different meeting locations, and few of them were conducted by phone or Skype. 22 interviews were conducted in English and 11 interviews conducted in Romanian with the participants who preferred Romanian to English.

### ***Research Findings***

#### ***Long term, Achievement Oriented Migration or the Romanian American Dream***

Unlike the short-term circular migration to Europe, Romanian immigrants come to the US to stay. Romanian migration to Europe emerges as temporary labor arrangements of migrants that accept consecutive short-term jobs. Since mass migration of Romanian migrants to Western Europe is a relatively recent phenomenon (20 years or less), it is too early to predict if it may eventually evolve into permanent migration, but most of the Romanian migrants to EU countries identify themselves with temporary migrants. As a result, the consequences of temporary migration are dramatically different – for families in the homeland, individuals themselves, and host societies – from the effects of a clear-cut, permanent migration with the entire family. By contrast, Romanian emigrants to the United States are preoccupied with their education and professional development in the new society. Romanians mention career, family

and prosperity as their top three achievements in the US.

The Romanian immigrant stories are fascinating to hear and come from all the walks of life. Mihai is a 35 years old Ivy League MBA graduate with prior experience in multinational corporations, who moved to the US on a business assignment and became here a bank manager. Laura, 40 years old, met her current American husband in Romania, moved to the US and continued her studies with a Master's and PhD degree and is currently searching for an academic position at the more than 2,000 universities and colleges in the US. A former Math Olympic, 60 years old Dan had fled the country to escape the communist regime and is currently an expert at a big telecommunications company in Silicon Valley. Second generation Romanian Monica came into the US when she was 8 years old escaping religious persecution against the Seventh Day Adventists, had become a lawyer, while her sister had become a doctor, and both of them feel very proud of their Romanian heritage. Constantin, now 50 years old, defected to Yugoslavia during communist times, spent time in Italian refugee camps until he immigrated to USA where he started as a strawberry-picker, and now is a wealthy entrepreneur who owns his own transportation company. Catalin and Cristina had won the Visa Lottery, moved to the US with two kids and are currently owning a construction company employing other Romanian workers. And the list can continue.

When asked: "Why did you choose to immigrate to America?", the participants' answers were two-fold. The first main reason consists of having family or friends in the US. The significance of networks, emphasized by the literature (Sandu, 2009; Massey, 1998), is supported by the main study findings. Sixty percent of all Romanian migrants today rely on the resources of their social capital in searching for job, housing, and new community:

"I moved to the States because I had my both brothers here. They left during communism, and

it was very hard for them to build a life here. But when I came, they provided everything for me. House, job, food, even friends... Because they had a good position in the Romanian community, everybody received me with open arms. Anyway, I stayed with them for a while, and they taught me everything I needed to know. I did not spend a penny for months. Then, when I was ready, I moved out.” (George, 36 years old, health care technician, Atlanta).

The second main reason for migrating to the US is the persisting myth of the American dream. According to the interviews, Romanians have always loved and idealized the United States. Some Romanians, Stowe (2010) argues, are in awe of foreigners, especially Americans. Romania, for instance, is one of the most pro-American countries in Europe (Eurobarometer, 2010).

“I emigrated to America, because I wanted to have a nice house, a car, and to be able to go on vacations... I wanted a better life.” (Adelina, 29, nurse, Atlanta).

“I grew up in Pitesti, a town in Romania in a family of intellectuals. I moved to Bucharest during my medical school and internship. I wanted to leave Romania because I knew that here I would get the best medical education in the world. Well, I also have to admit the fact that my brother and his wife were living here already played an important part. This mattered a lot, because they initiated us in the unending process of applying for medical internship. Now I am a resident physician, and there would be no other place where I wanted to be other than America. I learned so much here!” (Maria, 29, resident physician, NYC).

Besides happy stories of Romanians fitting right in the heart of American culture, a few stories describe several challenges generated by the absence of community and migration networks. Subscribing to the summer work-study programs available for students in Romania, two

of the participants came to United States with a temporary job offer. The two young Romanians admitted that they had perceived this offer as their only chance to migrate permanently to America. “I was in my fourth year in college, when I heard of this program. I applied, and was accepted. I wanted first to graduate, but then I realized this is the chance of my life” (Chris, 28, truck driver, Atlanta). With the risk of not finishing college, they decided that pursuing the American dream was more important for them.

Apart from these patterns, Ana, a 72-year old retired teacher, living in New York, has an interesting story of immigration, as a political refugee. Starting with a short narrative on the hardships of the communist regime, she described in detail how America epitomized the ideal concept of life and liberty:

“I wanted my children to live in freedom, and not have to worry about security police surveilling us 24 hours a day and following us everywhere. My husband received a scholarship in America in the ‘70s. He was a writer. From that moment on, we all knew that there is one goal for us: to leave communist Romania.” (Ana, 72, retired teacher, NY).

### *Facilitators of Acculturation*

We asked the participants “What things or persons helped you adapt to living in this country, and which member of the family adjusted easier?” Subsequently, interviewees were questioned about the factors that hindered and made difficult their adjustment to the new culture. Echoing findings from literature (Yeh, 2003; Bhugra, 2003; Oh et al., 2002; Sandu, 2009; Zhou, 2004), the results of the present study show that proficiency in English and community support are regarded as the primary determinants of success or failure of Romanians’ acculturation.

“I didn’t know the language at all. I learned it here, after I arrived. But this didn’t work against me, because I lived with my brother, and

they were part of a big Romanian community. I didn't even feel I was in America. After I learned English, I started to make American friends, and everything changed. Then I felt I was part of the American community, and not only the Romanian one. I went to school and got my degree in nursing. Everything was different after that (Mihai, 36, nurse, Atlanta).

The interviews revealed that the lack of English language skills keeps one confined to the Romanian community as in an ethnic enclave, confining them to the separation stage of acculturation (Berry, 1979). In this regard, community and networks seem to have negative consequences on immigrants' acculturation in host societies (Tilly, 2007). Consequently, some immigrants may become comfortable living in their own close knit community and never fully integrate into the mainstream culture.

Naturally, age at arrival and length of residence in the United States (Gong et al., 2003; Oh et al., 2002) are decisive factors for participants' perception of their adaptation to the dominant culture.

"I was already 50 years old when I moved to the States. I came here for my daughter. I could never learn their [American] ways of being, but I have many American friends at church." (Dan, 78, retired, Atlanta).

Moreover, lack of language skills, advanced age at arrival, and short length of living in the United States indicate propensity to acculturative stress (Gonzales, 2005; Berry, 2003). Acculturative stress, according to Nwadiora and McAdoo (1996), is related to changes imposed by new rules, norms and values of new culture. People who are isolated from familiar social contexts and networks may experience problems with language, unemployment, and discrimination. For instance, the participants with limited knowledge of English also admitted that they felt discriminated against. Asked if they still felt discriminated, after a few years of living in the United States, they answered negatively.

Perceived discrimination was also connected with area and status of residence; none of the participants living in New York, Florida or California, states with long history of migration and with 22% or higher foreign-born population (US Census, 2013), complained of discrimination.

"Even though I knew English when I moved to the United States, I had a strong accent. But this didn't make me feel discriminated against, because everybody was speaking a different English. I was no different from others." (Adelina, 32, doctor, NY).

This powerful quote reflects the ease of acculturation in a country of immigrants, which the United States has been historically from its inception. Perhaps acculturation in a country with a long history of immigration is less difficult than in societies where the strangers stand out from the natives. In contrast with New York City, the Atlanta area participants, coming from an area below the national average of immigrants (9%, compared to 13%, US Census 2013) mentioned more often that they felt discriminated against, but mostly during the period prior to receiving their green card, so when their immigration status was unclear and employment and language skills rather limited.

"I felt discriminated against many times, especially before I got my green card. I could not have a normal relationship with a guy, because they all thought I wanted to marry them and obtain the legal resident status." (Andreea, 37, teacher, Atlanta).

Overall, the study showed that the more educated the Romanian immigrants are, the less discrimination they perceive. For instance, the workplace experiences of Cristina, a waitress, are radically different than of Mihai, a bank manager. On one hand, an immigrant with lower level of education might not have advanced work and language skills; on the other hand, the colleagues and customers in white-collar,

professional work environments might be more accepting of diversity:

“You know, the people at your workplace... they view you for who you are, and they support you if you are an ambitious, hard working person... you will advance and people won't hold it against you that you didn't grow up in this country.” (Mihai, 35 years old, bank manager).

However, we did not find significant gender differences related to men and women perceived acculturation; however, parents agree that children have adjusted much quicker than the adults to the new social environment. Mihaela, a marketing director for a large accounting company in New York, mentions that “if you want to adjust to the American culture, you have to live like an American”. She emphasizes the role of bicultural orientation, an approach that confers a new identity, while maintaining the old one:

“Just by staying closed into your Romanian community will never make you part of this society. When in Rome, do as Romans do, as the saying goes.” (Mihaela, 40, marketing director, NY).

### ***High Stages of Integration***

Berry (1997) argued that acculturating persons are confronted with two questions pertaining to intercultural contact. The first one refers to people maintaining their cultural heritage, and the second one is related to engaging in intercultural contact with the dominant culture. Thus, four acculturation orientations emerge, as presented in the literature review (Berry, 1997, 2003). When both original culture and contact with new culture are important, people integrate in the cultural environment of the host country. If none of these two is important, then individuals are marginalized. Assimilation occurs when only the contact with dominant culture is important, and separation arises when

only cultural maintenance is of concern (Ward, 2008).

Our findings reveal that Romanians' propensity to integration is dominant. Romanians develop a bicultural orientation that successfully blends cultural dimensions from both American and Romanian cultures, while maintaining a strong Romanian identity. Scholars argue that this strategy is associated with less acculturative stress. By maintaining many values and traditions, giving up to a few (exculturation), and adopting new ones from the American culture (enculturation), Romanians situate themselves in the integration stage.

### ***Maintaining Romanian identity***

Religion and the religious holidays are the most preserved and cherished traditions by the Romanian immigrants. Romanians celebrate Christmas and Easter in the same fashion and following the same customs as in Romania.

“For Christmas we try to do everything as in Romania. We go to people's houses and sing carols. We organize shows with our Romanian songs and dances, so that children know their cultural heritage. In Romania, there are two types of traditions, one that is authentic, and another one recent and infused with Western or Oriental nuances. Here, we keep just the authentic Romanian tradition, the one that counts, the one that makes us Romanian.” (Daniel, 32, priest, Atlanta).

Both religious and secular components of Romanian christenings, weddings and funerals are carried out in a profound traditional way. Romanians are also very fond of their cuisine, which they mention as a strong symbol of preserving their ethnic identity. Despite youngsters' tendency to impose English as speaking language at home, Romanian parents tenaciously use Romanian language at home with their children. Observing families interacting at social events and cultural festivals, the dialogue is frequently conducted in two

languages, with parents speaking in their native language and youngsters responding back in English. Romanian children also speak English when they play and interact with each other. The second generation migrants understand Romanian perfectly but choose to respond back to parents in English because it comes easier that way. However, the children demonstrate exemplary Romanian language skills when they have to interact with their grandparents or older members of the Romanian community.

### ***Exculturation***

Exculturation (Gao, 2009) focuses on practices, values, and behaviors that are given up upon migration to the host country. When asked what were some of the discontinued traditions and cultural habits, Romanians evoked March 1 (when people celebrate the beginning of spring), and March 8 (International Women's Day). Similarly, they ceased celebrating the saint name days (in Romania they are as important as, if not more than, birthdays). The interviewees had also admitted that they mostly gave up the values that could alter their success.

"Here you can actually gain something if you are honest" (Chris, 28, truck driver, Atlanta).

"I remember a friend of mine from college who came here in 2005. He was very successful in Romania, but here he didn't do well. He did not respect his deadlines with his employers, lost his money... didn't do anything. He had to return to Romania. Here you have to stop cutting corners, and be serious, and hard working, otherwise you cannot succeed." (Bogdan, 28, salesman, Atlanta).

### ***Acculturation***

The Romanians appear to comfortably embrace American values, attitudes and traditions. They observe all American non-Romanian holidays – Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Memorial Day

or Labor Day. On Halloween, they take their kids to trick-or-treating and cook turkeys for Thanksgiving, just like the rest of Americans. Perhaps a sign of their gradual integration into the American society is the fact that they stop celebrating December 1<sup>st</sup> (Romania's National Day), but they fully adopt the festivities of 4<sup>th</sup> of July (US National Day) where they enjoy eating the American hamburgers on the same plate with the Romanian skinless sausages "*mici*".

The Romanian immigrants' lifestyle fits easily into the pattern of an American lifestyle, and their work ethic is infused with American work values of hard-work, commitment, being on time and meeting deadlines. Moreover, all study participants identified themselves as being Romanian-Americans. The naturalized Romanians consider the United States as their permanent home, and not a single participant had mentioned the intention or desire to return permanently to Romania. "This is the home for my children, so if I will ever go back to Romania, it will be for a short time. I want to be near my children and their families." (Daniel, 32, priest, Atlanta). Finally, the participants were asked to express their feelings and opinions about the American culture. "I have a great respect for it. It is young, dynamic, and much more open than the Romanian one. As for the lifestyle... everybody can freely live the life he wants." (Adelina, 29, resident physician, NY).

### ***Adoption of American Names***

Gerhards and Hans (2009) argue that in Germany, immigrant parents who are more assimilated give their children German names. Conversely, when parents are not integrated in the dominant culture, they name their children ethnic names. Indeed, name giving is an indicator of immigrants' acculturation to the cultural environment of the host country. Most frequently Romanians use Americanized names. Matei becomes Matthew, and Andrei becomes Andrew. In addition to blending in the mainstream culture, the American name giving to immigrant children could also be perceived

as a way to avoid perceived discrimination. The children with American names are less likely to stand out as being immigrants when they go to school, search for jobs and build careers.

Another interesting trend is noticed in the name giving process. As Sue and Tells (2007) argued, there is a difference between the name giving for female and male children. The Romanian tradition for the first or middle name is to be a saint name, however, this is discontinued in the Romanian community of the US. While Romanian male children still receive names of saints, even though with an Anglicized spelling, Romanian females are more likely to receive American names. Alessia, Alice, Maya, Isabelle or Amanda are examples of American names given to Romanian girls in the US, but they are not very common in the Romanian culture. As Sue and Tells (2007) explain, the tendency for the immigrant families is to insist on females' assimilation, while the males epitomize the carriers of tradition.

### ***Surprising Findings***

Although the central focus of this study is identity and acculturation, there are several significant collateral findings that emerged during the data analysis which are worth exploring in future research. First, based on this sample, the educational background of Romanian migrants coming to the US (42% college graduates and 30% with Masters/PhD education) is considerably higher than the average for both American and Romanian citizens. This finding is consistent with prior research on brain drain and how "the educated leave the East" (Bradatan and Kulcsar, 2013) and participant observation of Romanian communities across the US. Strongly correlated to their educational background, more than 70% of the interviewed Romanians were having an income of 60,000\$ and higher per year. The wide spectrum of occupations practiced by Romanians shows that the migrants that have a valuable skill on the job market can easily achieve the American dream. Based on our

study, most of the Romanian migrants to the US can be placed under the professional high-skilled migration category. Therefore, due to their high educational achievement, occupational skills, income level and low crime, Romanians are comparable to other model minorities in the US, such as the Asian and Jewish immigrants, which also have higher levels of income, education and lower crime than the average American citizens (with a median household income of 53,000\$/year; US Census Bureau, 2015).

Second, the Romanians who migrated to the US show a consistent pattern of professional success while they were still in their home country. To be more precise, while the Romanian immigrants migrating to Italy and Spain seem to belong more to the working class, the immigrants coming to the North American continent are more likely to belong to Romania's middle and upper middle class. Each immigrant that we have interviewed for our study possessed a unique professional skill that made him/her stand out on the job market once they have arrived into the US. This applies to both the low skill jobs (construction, maintenance, animal training etc.) and the high skill jobs (engineering, medicine, law, research, marketing etc.). Moreover, the majority of Romanian immigrants who have embarked on the journey of permanent migration had pursued some type of advanced professional education (graduate school or additional professional training) after they have arrived in the US. Obviously, this long-term orientation for career development is an indicator of the Romanian immigrants intention to integrate into the American society and contributed significantly to reaching out the American dream.

Third, it is worth talking about the marital status of Romanians as a powerful contributor to cultural integration and the American dream. Our interviews, as well as participant observation over 14 years reveal that the Romanians older than 30 years old typically immigrate to the United States as a family. According to the sample, more than 80% of the married Romanians are married to other Romanians that

they bring along from Romania, or that they meet in Romanian communities in the US. While the temporary migration to Italy and Spain where the husband/ wife migrates and leaves the partner in the home country to take care of the children has been notorious for increasing the rate of divorce among migrant workers, the permanent migration of Romanians to the United States shows a different dynamic. The immigration journey of a married couple and the pursuit of the American dream glue the couple together and increase the stability of their marriage. Far away from family and friends, the Romanian spouse sometimes becomes the only family member or best friend close to the immigrant in times of financial or emotional distress. The Romanian spouse, typically a working spouse, does not contribute only financially to the household income, but becomes also the most important factor in the preservation of ethnic/ national identity (by cooking traditional food, celebrating the national holidays, teaching the native language to children and overall, sharing the same cultural norms and traditions). For instance, of the 33 Romanians interviewed for our study, only two were divorced (6%), while the others were raving about the fact that they were not just married, but “happily married”. The marital happiness and low rate of divorce seems to be yet another surprising dimension of permanent migration and the pursuit of the Romanian American dream. Obviously, the low rate of divorce is highly correlated with the high level of education. But it is worth noting that the divorce rate in the Romanian communities in the United States is significantly lower than in both Romania and the United States (approximately 50%).

### Study Limitations

The ambition of qualitative research is not to offer data that can be generalizable, but to provide unique glimpses into the lives of special populations, which would remain hidden to the general public otherwise. Therefore, the major strength of this study is given by the in-depth

nature of the data, not its broad generalization to an entire population. Although the sample is limited in size, we have used triangulation to increase the reliability of our findings. Thus, the interview analysis has been corroborated with hundreds of hours of participant observation of Romanian communities in Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco over a time span of 14 years. The participant observation confirms and complements in many ways the findings resulted from the qualitative analysis of the interviews. Working in a team of two researchers had also ensured for higher inter-coding reliability. Last but not the least, while our own identity as Romanian immigrants is an added strength of the study, we have used American informants to generate a sample that is as random as possible (for qualitative research).

### Conclusions

While the current research on Romanian migration is focused on the temporary and circular movements of Romanians to Europe (due to its amplitude), with the exception of Bradatan and Kulczar (2013), we could not identify any research studies that analyzed Romanians’ permanent migration to the United States. Consequently, this paper explored Romanians’ motives of migration to, and their process of acculturation in the New World. The most interesting findings emphasize the long term and achievement orientation of Romanian migration and their choice for integration as an acculturation strategy. The study’s findings stress the positive influence of English proficiency, strong community support, young age at arrival, and length of residence in America on the process of Romanians’ acculturation. The study shows that Romanians maintain their traditions, while adopting new values, behaviors, and attitudes from the American culture. Using name giving as an indicator of assimilation, our findings suggest that Romanians show a high level of integration, as the most common names for Romanian children are either American or Romanian with Anglicized spelling.

In the context where systematic data on the Romanian migration to the US is impossible to aggregate, this study fills an important gap on the permanent migration, identity and integration of Romanians to North America. The Romanian American dream, grounded

on career success and family stability, is the symbol used to describe the complex equation of high education, highly-skilled occupational status and low divorce that contributes to the successful integration of Romanian immigrants into the American society.

**Table 1: Sample Demographics**

Variable	Values	N = 33	Percentage
Gender	Female	17	51.5%
	Male	16	48.5%
Age	Younger than 30 years old	8	24.2%
	31-40 years old	17	51.5%
	41- 50 years old	4	12.1%
	51- 60 years old	1	3%
	Older than 60 years old	3	9%
Education	Less than high school	1	3%
	High school	8	24.2%
	College	14	42.4%
	Masters/ PhD	10	30.3%
Marital Status	Single, never married	10	30.3%
	Married	19	57.5%
	Divorced	2	6%
	Widowed	2	6%
Years in the US	0-5 years	5	15.1%
	6-10 years	9	27.2%
	11-15 years	6	18.1%
	More than 15 years	13	39.3%
US Citizenship	Yes	22	66.6%
	No	11	33.4%

## References

Alba, F. (1978) Mexico's international migration as a manifestation of its development pattern. *International Migration Review*, 12, 502-551.

Agerpress (2015) Available at <http://www.agerpres.ro/english/2015/05/11/us-official-romania-became-a-leader-in-information-technology-romanian-the-second-language-spoken-in-microsoft-offices>. Accessed on April 9, 2015.

Anghel, R. G. (2008) Changing Statuses: Freedom of Movement, Locality and Transnationality

of Irregular Romanian Migrants in Milan. *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*, 34, 5, 787-802.

Balaz, V., Williams, A. and Kollar, D. (2004) Temporary versus permanent youth brain drain: Economic implication. *International Migration*, 42, 3-34.

Baldwin-Edwards, M. (2007) Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis: Migration policies for Romania within European Union. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 7, 1, 5-35.

Berry, J. W, Trimble, J. and Olmeda, E. (1986) The assessment of acculturation, in W. J. Lonner and

- J. W. Berry (eds.), *Field methods in cross-cultural psychology*, London, UK: Sage.
- Berry, J. W. (2003) *Conceptual Approaches to Acculturation*, in K. M. Chun (ed.), *Acculturation: Advances in Theories, Measurement and Applied Research*, Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bradatan, C. and Kulcsar, L. (2013) When the educated leave the East: Romanian and Hungarian skilled immigration to the United States. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*.
- Choi, J. and Thomas, M. (2009) Predictive factors of acculturation attitudes and social support among Asian immigrants in the USA. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 18, 67-84.
- Commander, S. (2004) The brain drain: A review of theory and facts. *Brussels Economic Review*, 47, 29-44.
- Embassy of Romania to Washington, D.C. (2015) Available at <http://washington.mae.ro/en>. Accessed on July 15, 2015.
- Ethnobarometer (2004) *Ethnic Mobility in Romania*. Available at [www.ethnobarometer.org](http://www.ethnobarometer.org). Accessed on April 9, 2012.
- Faist, T., Pitkanen, P., Gerdes, J. and Reisenauer, E. (2010) Toward transnational studies: World theories, transnationalisation and changing institutions. *Journal of Ethnic Migration Studies*, 36, 1665-1687.
- Feliciano, C. (2001) The benefits of biculturalism: Exposure to immigrant culture and dropping out of school among Asian and Latino youths. *Social Science Quarterly* 82, 865-879.
- Fowler, F. and Mangione, T. (1990) *Standardized survey interviewing: Minimizing interviewer-related error*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Gao, H. (2005) *The invisible handshake: Interpreting the job-seeking communication of foreign-born Chinese in the US*, PhD dissertation. Available at <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/2888/>. Accessed on April 9, 2013.
- Gerhards, J. and Hans, S. (2009) From Hassan to Herbert: Name-giving patterns of immigrant parents between acculturation and ethnic maintenance. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 114, 1102-1128.
- Hofstede, G. (2001) *Culture's consequences, comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kim, Y. Y., Lujan, P. and Dixon, L. D. (1998) "I can walk both ways:" Identity integration of American Indians in Oklahoma. *Human Communication Research*, 25, 2, 252-274.
- Koser, K. (2007) *International migration*. New York, NY: Oxford.
- Lepadatu, D. (2010) The stranger in the academe. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Available at <https://chronicle.com/article/The-Stranger-in-Academe/66091/>. Accessed on July 10, 2015.
- Lepadatu, D. (2012) The transformative power of faculty development abroad: A Romanian scholar's role to the internationalization of higher education. *Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*, 4, 2.
- Lepadatu, D, Stephens, C. and Lepadatu, G. (2009) The stranger in the classroom: International faculty and their professional acculturation, in S. Robbins and S. H. Smith (eds.), *Bridging cultures or caught between: International women faculty and their professional acculturation*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Lett, J. (1990) Emics and etics: Notes on the epistemology of anthropology, in T.N. Headland, K. L. Pike and Harris, M. (eds.), *Emics and etics: The insider/outsider debate*. *Frontiers of anthropology*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Levitt, P. and Glick Schiller, N. (2004) Conceptualizing simultaneity: A transnational social field perspective on society. *International Migration Review*, 38, 1002-1039.
- Massey, D. S. (1988) Economic development and international migration in comparative perspective. *Population and Development Review*, 14, 383-413.
- Massey, D. and Taylor, E. (1998) *Worlds in motion: Understanding international migration at the end of the millennium*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon.
- Massey, D., Durand, J. and Malone, N. J. (2002) *Beyond smoke and mirrors: Mexican immigration in an era of economic integration*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Morawska, E. (1988) The sociology and historiography of immigration, in *Myth, Reality, and History: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Immigration*, New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.
- Noh, S. and Kaspar, V. (2003) Perceived discrimination and depression: Moderating effects of coping, acculturation, and ethnic support. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93, 232-238.
- Oh, Y., Koeske, G. F. and Sales, E. (2002) Acculturation, stress, and depressive symptoms among Korean immigrants in the United States. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 142, 511-526.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2012) *Trends in International*

Migration. Paris: OECD. Available at <http://www.oecd.org>. Accessed on April 9, 2012.

Romanian Institute of Statistics (2014) *Migratia Internationala a Romaniei*. Available at <http://www.insse.ro/cms/>. Accessed on May 9, 2014.

Piore, M. J. (1979) *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Portes, A. and Walton, J. (1981) *Labor, class, and the international system*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Sandu, D. (2005) Dynamics of Romanian Emigration after 1989: From a Macro to a Micro Level. *International Journal of Sociology*, 35, 3, 36-56.

Sandu, D. (2006) *Living abroad on a temporary basis*. Bucharest, Romania: Open Society Foundation.

Sandu, D. (2009) *Lumile sociale ale migratiei romanesti in strainatate*. (The social worlds of Romanian migration). Bucharest, Romania: University of Bucharest.

Smyth, M. (2009) Insider-Outsider Issues in Researching Violent and Divided Societies, in E. Porter, G. Robinson, M. Smyth, A. Schnabel and E. Osaghae, *Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences*, New York: United Nations University Press.

Stan, L. (2002) Access to Securitate files: The trials and tribulations of Romanian law. *East European politics and society*, 16, 55-90.

Stowe, D. (2010) *Romania: The essential guide to customs and culture*. London, UK: Kuperard.

Taylor, J. E. (1986) Differential migration, networks, information and risk, in Stark, O. (ed.),

*Research in human capital and development: Migration, human capital, and development*. Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, 147-171.

Tilly, C. (2007) Trust networks in transnational migration. *Sociological Forum*, 22, 3-24.

Truslow Adams, J. (1931, 2001) *The Epic of America*. Simons Publications.

United States Census (2010, 2013, 2014, 2015) Available at [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

US Official: Romania Became a Leader in Information Technology; Romanian is the Second Language Spoken in Microsoft Offices (2015) May 11, 2015. Available at <http://www.agerpres.ro/english/2015/05/11/us-official-romania-became-a-leader-in-information-technology-romanian-the-second-language-spoken-in-microsoft-offices-13-20-19>. Accessed on June 21, 2015.

US Embassy to Romania (2015) Available at <http://romania.usembassy.gov/visas/immigrant.html>. Accessed on June 21, 2015.

Ward, C. (2007) Thinking outside the Berry boxes: New perspectives on identity, acculturation and intercultural relations. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 32, 105-114.

World Bank (2010) Available at [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org). Accessed on April 9, 2012.

Yeh, C. J. (2003) Age, acculturation, cultural adjustment, and mental health symptoms of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese immigrant youths. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 9, 34-48.

Zhou, M. (2004) Assimilation, the Asian way, in T. Jacoby (ed.), *Reinventing the melting pot: The new immigrants and what it means to be an American*. New York, NY: Basic Books.