



2017

# Country study: Romania. Empowering communities in Europe



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## INTRODUCTION

### METHODOLOGY FOR THE CURRENT STUDY

The population of Romania according to the Romanian National Institute for Statistics is 19.7 million out of which 5 225 000 persons are retired and receive a form of pension, with the medium benefit of approximately 1022 RON (220 Euro). Persons who are retired, age over 62 for women and 65 for men, are one of the most conservative communities in Romania, especially towards migrants, foreigners or persons not belonging to their community. They are eligible from social benefits (pension) and other financial stimulants if they find themselves in other vulnerable categories (for example persons with disabilities) and have free public transportation (only inside the major cities), in and out of their residential cities.

This community has also formal NGOs that represent and advocate for their rights in front of governmental bodies, mainly towards the ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour, both institution having responsibilities in the field of social services. Furthermore, they have the opportunity to be member of Retired Persons' Club, **a public institution network** of facilities for elderly persons that are funded by the Romanian government through the Local General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection.

According to the project description and partnership program within the project entitled ~Europe for citizens~, CNRR has conducted three focus group meetings with 18 persons from the respective community in Bucharest. The Focus group meetings were conducted according with the guidelines provided by the main applicant of the project:

- 6 participants per focus group
- Gender balanced (6 man and 6 women in total - 3 men / 3 women per focus group)
- Time dedicated per focus group between 1 -2 hours
- two facilitators: one moderator and one recorder

CNRR representatives (facilitators) have conducted all three Focus groups at the main office in Bucharest having the participants' consent for participating in the study. Interviewers were permitted by the participants to take notes and record the findings on paper but did not give consent for audio / video recording. The notes were written in Romanian and translated in English by CNRR.

## SECONDARY DATA

### MIGRATION AND ASYLUM IN ROMANIA

#### Migration profile

Romania is one of the few countries in Europe which has a Parliament Group with representatives from the main ethnic minorities present, most of them with historical significance for the development of the state. The migrant communities that settled in Romania after the fall of communism, for example the Afghan community does not fulfil the law requirements to have a pro-bono Parliamentary seat for minorities. Also, Romania is one of the European countries who do not offer political rights for non-citizens, even at the local level. For example, a migrant or a refugee in Romania does not have the right to vote or to be elected in a public seat.

While the number of BIPs remains low – with an estimated 3000 persons living in the country and fewer than 40,000 applied for asylum since the beginning of the 90s – integration has not been high on the political agenda during the past years. Romania is otherwise perceived more as a “transit” rather than a destination country by both BIPs as well as authorities themselves, and focus on adapted policies in this respect has always been very low.

According to the relocation schemes proposed by the European Commission, during the period 2016-mid 2017, Romania will relocate, from Italy and Greece a total of 6205 individuals in need of international protection.

Until October 2017, Romania had relocated approximately 900 refugees from Syria and Eritrea (6th place in the EU according to the number of relocations).

In Romania integration mainly falls under the responsibility of the General Inspectorate for Immigration within the Ministry of Interior. There are few public authorities that have direct responsibilities in the integration process, such as Health, Education and Labour, most efforts with respect to integration depending on NGOs funded through EU grants.

Romania's current participation in relocation and resettlement schemes nevertheless means that enhanced efforts are needed to identify durable solutions for BIPs. In this context, the development of integration policies gained more and more attention from both the general public as well as local and central level authorities. Efforts were made in this regard through the establishment, by the former Government, of the Inter-ministerial Committee "National Coalition for Refugee Integration", which was meant to bring all relevant ministries and other stakeholders together in order to come up with solutions to the challenges of integrating relocated refugees. After a strong start in October 2015, the activity of the Coalition – regulated through a Government Decision no. 312/2015 – stopped when the person in charge (former State Secretary in the Ministry of Labour) was revoked and the Coalition was re-established under the responsibility of the Prime Minister's Cabinet. It is unclear if upcoming Parliamentary elections and the new Government – to be established most likely at the end of 2017- will contribute to a revival of the Coalition's work.

An increased interest in the topic of asylum is likely with the upcoming Romanian presidency of the European Council which is set for January-June 2019. In this perspective, the Cabinet of the Secretary of State for European Affairs, under the Ministry of Labour, organized a meeting aiming to identify proposals from NGOs and representatives of the General Inspectorate for Immigration as to what concerns potential improvements on the EU policy on asylum and integration. Given its responsibility for driving forward the Council's work on EU legislation, the future EC Romanian presidency could represent a context where public authorities will be more prone to provide a positive response to advocacy initiatives related to the matter, matter outlined by the Secretary of State.

Meanwhile, the Government Ordinance 44/2004, which is currently undergoing some modifications, represents the main legal instrument that governs the integration of BIPs in Romania. According to the ordinance, BIPs benefit from an individual plan of measures that facilitates their local integration. In order to benefit from a set of Government provided services and assistance, an amendment to the Asylum Law in 2015 obligates BIPs to enrol and actively participate in the National Integration Program.

In this context, there is a need to monitor the impact of the legal amendments – current and upcoming. Additional integration assistance is almost exclusively dependent on AMIF projects, which often lack sustainability and are affected by funding gaps. The new AMIF funded projects for the integration cover the entire territory of Romania, but are divided, as of 2016, in 5 regions and are led by different consortia of organizations with different levels of expertise when it comes to BIPs integration.

### **Recent trends in migration policy**

Romania has received in 2011 a record number of asylum applications (.....) since 1991 due to the political instability in the Middle East and North Africa (also known as the “Arab Spring”) and the armed conflict that started in Syria and Iraq. Between 2011 and 2015, the asylum applications have begun to decrease. The same can be said about migrants coming to Romania from non-EU countries with having other purposes than seeking international protection.

There have been actions coming from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to bolster the reception capacities in terms of housing by supplementing the number of accommodation positions in the Reception Centres and also to use AMIF funding to assure that new asylum seekers and BIP have the possibility to be accommodated outside the centres. Furthermore, there have been coordination meetings at the central and local level to assess the accommodation capacity in the event of a “refugee massive influx”.

The weekly governmental meetings have included issues of migration and asylum that have been brought to the attention of the Prime Minister’s cabinet by the opening of a new transit route in the region of the Black sea and by the illegal camps set up refugee on the outskirts of the city of Timisoara.

In terms of practical and legislative modification, there have been a number of amendments to the laws governing migration and asylum. However, it did not grant BIPs or migrants additional rights. In 2016 the General Inspectorate for Immigration has proposed a number of legislative modifications for the Government Ordinance no. 44 / 2004 concerning integration with the aim of facilitating BIPs’ integration in Romania. The legislative amendments proposed have not

been adopted so far, the text still being in internal consultations. It is expected for the amendments to be submitted for public debate until the end of 2017.

## **Attitudes concerning the reception migrants and refugees – changes since mid-2015**

Romania has not been considered and still is not considered by both public authorities and refugees a “country of destination” but rather a “transit country”. At the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017 when the number of asylum application has significant increased, local public authorities and the media has started to pay interest in the issue migration and asylum. There have been numerous field reports from counties like Timisoara where mixed groups (both persons seeking protection and economic migrants) have entered illegally the country from Serbia. The opening of a new migrant route was a direct consequence of the policies implemented by Hungary, which included building fences, improving the control at the border and taking into consideration the alternative of detention for migrants entering the country illegal. On a quick survey of the news, there content had a similar structure, presenting the topic of migration had the same structure: A brief presentation of the subject, a short interview with a public authority’s representative and a few opinions recorded by the media field worker with local community members concerning the subject. Most opinion polls or researches have been done or ordered by the media public companies or by NGOs in the field of migration.

“Gandul”, one of most read and known publications in Romania, has initiated in 2015 an online poll in which they asked the readers if they agree with the European Union’s plan to impose refugee quotas. Out of 11.346 persons who participated, 73.65 % declared that they do not agree for Romania to receive refugees<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, a study made by The Romanian National Institute for Statistics (INS) in 2015 confirmed that 56.3 % of the respondents (approximately 30.000 persons) do not agree for Romania to receive refugees. The INS director declared that “This perceptive regarding refugee is very common among east-European countries. Some of

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<sup>1</sup> The online poll is accessible at <http://www.gandul.info/voteaza/sondaj-credeti-ca-romania-ar-trebui-sa-primeasca-refugiati-14688660>

them are more radical than Romania if we compare the numbers. Also, if we look at other aspects linked to the European Union, we see that there is a clear negative perception related to the European Institutions". The same question was introduced in a poll in 2016 organized by the same institution, in which 84.6% of the respondents declared that they do "not want migrants and refugees in Romania". This shows a difference of almost 30% in less than one year.

DIGI TV, another mass media giant in Romania, has ordered a poll in November 2015 asking Romanians if they agree with refugees and migrants living in Romania. According to the poll results, 51% of the respondents declared that they do not agree / do not partially agree.

There have been also polls and studies conducted by local news agencies in the major counties in Romania, such as Timis, Constanta, Cluj-Napoca or Craiova. The polls conducted at the local level (city level or county level) have shown similar results with those conducted at the national level. However, there have been indications that in counties with rural areas the perception towards refugees tends to be more negativistic.

The Bucharest City Hall is the only local public authority that in 2015 created a special department for Integration of Migrants and Diversity. In September 2016 they commenced a study with different questions related to the standard of living in the city, one of the questions being "If you agree with refugees living in Bucharest?" Out of all respondents, 66.1% declared that do not agree with refugees coming to Romania and settling in their residential areas.

In April 2016, the NGO "Pro-Democratia" has implemented an EU funded project to assess the population's perception regarding the so called "refugee crisis". The study had included 768 persons who were interviewed directly or by phone. The conclusions were that:

- 99% of the subjects have heard, one way or another, about the refugee crisis in Europe
- 55% of the subjects are getting information about this subject from the Internet / Social media, 29% from the TV or Radio and the rest from newspapers

- 35% believe that Romania has more than 300 refugees at the current moment, 33% believe that there are between 100 and 300 refugees and the rest believe that they are less than 100
- 45% agree with the fact that Romania hosts refugees and 55% do not agree with this fact
- 45% of the subjects believe that the so called “refugee crisis” is linked to a new kind of social warfare
- 65% of the subjects would want their children to study in the same class with a refugee
- 65% of the subjects do not agree with the EU deciding that Romania should receive more refugees
- 52% of the subjects believe that the new refugees must be hosted in special centres (not in the city, not in the countryside)
- 45 % of the subjects declare that they do not feel safe due to the recent event in the field of migration
- 62% of the subjects declared that Romania (public authorities) should be more involved in the subject
- 69% of the subjects declared that they would hire a refugee
- 72 % of the subjects declared that the current situation regarding refugees will surely create future public revolts

In May 2017, 486 Romanian citizens addressed and signed an online petition for the President stating that they do not want “refugee terrorists” to be resettled in Romania. Most persons who signed the petition were residence from the city of Iasi (186).

In addition with the studies and polls mentioned, the governmental institution have developed migration strategies and predictions based on the past experience and current trends. The motto of the National Strategy on Migration for 2015 - 2018 is that “migration is a process that needs to be properly managed, not a problem that needs solving”.

## Public discourse, role of media and civil society

The topic of migration and asylum in Romania has not represented a priority for the media and opinion leaders until the events known as the “Arab spring”. In 2010, the Romanian National Press Agency conducted a survey of that particular year and concluded that the most news reports were concerning politics, social events and sports.

The subject has become to rise in popularity with the increase of number of asylum application in 2011 and continued to be present until today.

In Romania the topic concerning migration and asylum had been controversial, the media playing a very important role in diffusing information for the public. In mainstream media reports or debates, there have general tried to be objective in terms of presenting the “refugee crisis” but they also lean towards the negative impact that the reception of refugees could have.

Considering the findings of our study started in August 2017, out of the first 40 news posted on the Internet with the search engine set on “Refugees in Romania”:

- 26 have the characters of “sensational” news, starting with the title : SHOCK, SHOKING, SENSATION, PRIME TIME NEWS, NEWS FLASH in respect to the refugee distribution quota for Romania by the end of 2017
- 10 were posts from NGOs or public authorities with responsibilities in the field of integration
- The other 4 news were related to violent incidents having subject refugees in Romania

Actors of the civil society have been involved in offering assistance to migrants and BIPs since 1991. At the current moment, there are approximately 10 NGOs who are directly involved in issues of migration and asylum that implement projects thought AMIF founding in different areas of the country. NGOs have constantly lunched public interventions and advocated for the reception of refugees in Romania in contrast with the majority of negative publicity promoted by the media and opinion leaders. There have also been calls for project proposals from the Ministry of Internal Affairs for NGOs to develop a publicity campaign with the aim of bringing to the public a humanitarian perspective towards issues of migrant and asylum.

Furthermore, there have been NGOs and private entities that traditionally were not offering assistance to migrants and refugees and who have extended their services in this field. Also, there have been international movements such as “Refugees Welcome!” that opened branches in Romania as a reaction to anti-immigration protests what were organized.

In 2016 and 2017 there have been reports that NGOs who have implemented EU funded project with the aim of assisting and facilitating refugees’ integration process in Romania have been victims of hate speech. For example, in 2017, an NGO based in the city of Cluj-Napoca has been accused by different community representatives of “bringing refugees in Romania” received numerous threats at their offices. The NGO has also filed a complaint with the police after their offices were allegedly vandalized in 2016. Another example concerns a NGO based in Bucharest. The NGO’s representatives photographs were inserted in a photo with a background suggesting flames and the message “these are the persons responsible for bringing refugees in Romania! We should act how!”. This photograph was distributed on numerous social media websites or groups linked to nationalist or far-right movements in Romania”.

There have been concerns coming from other NGOs that in the current social climate, they could be targeted by persons who opposed the reception of refugees in Romania and could became victims of hate crimes.

# FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS INTERVIEWS

## Experience with refugees and other migrants

During the focus group meetings, participants were asked about the extent of their experience with refugees or migrants in the community (if they interacted are aware of refugees / migrants in their area, if they came in contact with this category of persons, etc). Most recipients declared that they cannot make a difference between refugees, migrants and members of the traditional ethnic minorities in Romania. Their perception is that a Romanian citizen is characterized by appearance (including by skin colour), language and religion. Furthermore, the participants do not have a clear understanding of the legal differences between their statuses in Romania<sup>2</sup>. In the focus groups meetings refugees were referred using different terminology: asylum seekers, protected persons, refugees, asylums, migrants, foreigners, etc.

Secondly, the participants in the Focus Group No. 1 and No. 2 declared that they have little contact with refugees or migrants in their neighbourhood. None of the respondents declared that they have had the opportunity to interact with refugees directly, but rather they are visible to their appearance. Their knowledge of the presence refugees was almost exclusively based on the information they receive through different media channels.

In the third group some of the participants declared that they interacted with refugees because they are working or used to work with the general public and some of the clients were refugees. They declared that they are not different from ordinary migrants in Romania and only found out about their status after requesting documents.

## Arguments against the reception of refugees

During the focus groups meetings, respondents raised a number of issues and arguments against the reception of refugees in Romania. Most arguments presented by the participants against the reception of migrants were linked to public security, national security, cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Asylum seekers, refugees, holders of subsidiary protection

differences (perceived as incompatible with the Romanian or European culture) and religious clashes.

All participants raised the question of public and national security when asked to present arguments against the reception of refugees. They consider that there is a direct link between crime and the presence of refugee or migrants in their community: the increased number of refugees coming to Romania has increased the crime rates. When asked if they know about studies or statistics, they could not indicate the sources of information, but rather declared that this is “common sense if you look what horrible things are happening in other countries”. They also declared that there is a direct link between having a proper job and crime rates. They consider that some refugees do not want to work and if they do not have daily activities, “they start having ideas” about how they can obtain money (they were referring to steal).

The second most common answer from the participant was that refugees are a threat to national security due to the fact that they can be terrorists or can become religious zealots for certain religious groups or to influence other to commit terrorist acts. One participant gave the example of the incident in the city Craiova<sup>3</sup>. The participants declared that they do not have the proper information about who is a terrorist or not from the authorities and that “it is impossible for the Romanian state control and check-up properly every refugee that comes in Romania”.

Some of the participants in the study also declared that the Arabic or “Islamic” culture is very different from the “ancestral Romanian traditions” which would make their integration hard. Two of the participants declared that if other countries “accepts them better”, they should be allowed to go there. They consider persons coming from the Middle East to be “laud”, “aggressive”, “agitated” and “conservative towards integration”. One participant mentioned that she saw some men speaking in what she describes to be Arabic and that they were very noisy.

Not the least, a number of participants implied that their religious education is based on violent acts against everyone who is not a Muslim and that they do not have respect for other religions.

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<sup>3</sup> A case where a young adult was arrested by the authorities being accused for plotting terrorist attacks for a well known organisation that has been linked to terrorist acts

## **Sources of information**

Participants do not have a more diversified source of information concerning migration and refugees in Romania due to the fact that only 2 of the 18 participants have constant access to internet at home.

According to the participants' feedback, most sources of information are composed "visual media": from the TV or radio. As they are retired and spend most of their time at home, they declared that they watch the news on a daily basis, mostly mainstream media channels in Romania. They also have declared that they watch frequently televised debates, some of them related to "the issue of refugees".

Secondary, participants declared that they have information related to refugees from newspapers and from neighbours, who, they say, came in contact one way or another with refugees and migrants.

Opinion leaders or other sources of information were not mentioned to be present.

## **Attitudes towards hate speech and violence against refugees**

During the focus group meetings the facilitators asked the participants what attitude they would have if they would assist at hate speech or discrimination against refugees.

Participants were illustrated with a hypothetical situation where a refugee is subjected with a range of discrimination, including verbal harassment and hate speech. They were asked to describe what their reaction would be as a third person assisting the scene.

Most of the respondents declared that they do not agree with expressing one's negative opinion towards refugees in their presence. The majority declared that they would not encourage or take part in such a dialogue, whilst three of them declared that they would firmly interrupt discussions and explain that they do not adhere to hate speech.

When asked what attitude they would have if they would assist at conversations containing hate speech and discrimination against refugees 15 of the respondents declared that they would tolerate such situations provided that no refugee assisted.

Questioned on the difference of attitude in the two given hypothesis, ten of the participants declared that they consider the current trend of negative speech against refugees as an expression of freedom of thought and speech. However, they declared that they would uphold from expressing such attitudes when confronted with refugees.

One in six respondents agreed that hate speech leads to discrimination in various areas of social life, including education, employment and housing, which can further on contribute to social isolation. Two in six respondents declared that they do not consider this as a problem.

One of the questions addressed was whether they agree with a quote from a local newspaper's online forum, saying that refugees should not be allowed to exit their countries of origin, respondents had mixed opinions. Four of them declared that they agree with the quote, as long as there is a safe zone inside the country of origin where refugees could flee. 12 of them declared they do not adhere at all with the quote, as everyone's life should be protected.

Questioned whether they would agree with their neighbourhood to host relocated refugees, twelve of the respondents declared that they would prefer not to have refugees living in their vicinity and would rather have them receive protection from another country.

When asked what they would do whether they would assist at a violent attack against refugees, all of the participants firmly responded that they would condemn such incidents and attempt to stop violence. Participants were exemplified real cases where Muslim refugee women were forced to remove their scarfs and more severe cases, where refugees were physically abused just because they were being heard speaking a foreign language.

Further on, participants were asked whether their opinion on refugees is influenced by the association made in parts of the media with security concerns.

All of the respondents declared they share, to different extents, part of the worries expressed in the media related to a potential increase of terrorism threats. Five of them stated that they are convinced that refugees are more prone to organize terrorist attacks, and declaring that does not represent a form of hate speech. The rest of the participants declared that they are

aware that such concerns represent a form of prejudice and potentially hate speech, stating that, at the same time, they cannot uphold from thinking it.

Half of those questioned considered that statement that most foreigners who claim that are refugee really aren't refugees. They consider that they only want economic advantages and are not interested in working. Participants were against physical violence towards migrants on the grounds that they are "human like us" but had tendencies to imply that the police, who in their vision represent the backbone of order, should intervene if needed.

### **Response to pro-refugee arguments**

The facilitator has asked the participants to express if they are aware of pro-refugees arguments. Three participants have declared that they are aware of pro-refugee arguments from the news, especially in relation with the positive impact in the field of labour and economics. They declared that even if there are some positive aspects that they heard about, they do not "believe in them" or that "the positive parts are not so relevant in comparison with the negative aspects".

Asked whether Romania has an obligation to grant international protection to people in need, the majority of the respondents confirmed having heard of international and European treaties in this sense. Further on, we aimed to find out whether beyond these obligations; participants would identify other reasons to help refugees.

12 of the respondents declared that it is necessary to assist refugees in finding a safe shelter whilst X of the participants declared it is not Romania's responsibility to do so.

Within discussion, several participants made analogies between the hardships met by refugees with the difficult experiences many Romanians had gone through during communism. One respondent reminded that after immediately communism collapsed there were several hundred thousands of Romanians seeking asylum worldwide.

Asked whether they acknowledge the benefits refugees may bring to the Romanian economy, most of the respondents declared that high-skilled categories, such as doctors, engineers and

teachers have a considerable potential of integration and should be provided with support from society.

Further on, we addressed the question whether participants would ever consider volunteering in order to help refugees integrate in Romania. Two thirds of the respondents declared that they would get involved if they would know about particular cases needing support.

### **Other, country specific issues**

It also has to be taken into consideration the fact that the participants in the study were residence of Bucharest but the majority they were not born and raised here as they have migrated from rural areas since the 1970s. Furthermore, it has to be taken into consideration that Bucharest is a cosmopolitan city with migrants, refugees and traditional ethnic minorities.

## CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, GOOD PRACTICES

The current study had the aim of determine in Bucharest what is community in Bucharest reaction and attitude towards the reception of migrants. From the note and finding recorded during the focus groups meetings that were organized between August and September 2017 in Bucharest, it can be concluded that there is an overwhelming negative opinion on the reception of refugees and migrants in Romania. As the motives differs from a persons or a group of persons, it is concluded that the majority of the members of this community is against the reception of refugees and have the possibility ( thought political or public affiliation, the right to vote and to be elected) to advocate against the reception of refugees and migrants in the future. Although their community is not a closed community where outsiders do not have access, they can be subjects of training sessions and workshops.

There is a clear need of public awareness strategies and activities, needing the support of the state and of the private sector, including NGOs. Most persons of the respective community do not have a diversified source of information and it is subject to a clear influence of what is propaganda in the media. There are no multiple sources of the information to compare if information is valid or know or to explain in detail about the issue. From the way that the participants were unable to distinguish between different categories of migrants in Romania, it is clear that the media did not have the role of educator the public, but rather to inform “only at the surface” the readers. On the same note, all participants were against any form of violence towards refugees or migrants and there have not been any incidents during the focus groups to suggest that an extremist behaviour or ideology.

In this context, the study concluded that it is recommended for the community to:

- Receive proper information regarding migration and asylum in Romania, both from a practical and legislative point of view
- Receive training on aspects related to the positive impact of the reception of refugees in Romania

- Interact with members of the migrant or refugee communities in Bucharest or in other parts of Romania
- Be involved in multicultural events organized in partnership with the representatives from the migrant / refugee community

Examples of good practice are present in Romania and in other European countries that are similar from a legislative and perception perspective, where NGOs have joined up members of different communities and members of the migrant community with the aim of promoting cultural orientation, accommodation and trainings.

In Romania, several NGOs have already organized multicultural session with residence from different cities/neighbourhood and migrants/refugees with the aim of shaping attitudes in respect to the reception of refugees and migrants. The positive impact could be replicated in similar sessions.

#### DISCLAIMER

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