

**The 6th International Conference on Economics and Social Sciences
Geopolitical Perspectives and Technological Challenges
for Sustainable Growth in the 21st Century
June 15-16, 2023
Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania**

**Between East and West: Geopolitical Perspectives
for Young Arab Migrants in Romania**

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DOI: 10.24789788367405546-056

Abstract

Romania is becoming an emerging destination for young migrants from Arab countries. In this paper, we adopt a transnationalist position in terms of geopolitical comparisons between host and home countries in order to understand the perspectives that young Arab migrants in Romania have. The qualitative research is based on data collected through twenty semi-structured, psychographic interviews (conducted between January 2020 and November 2021) with young Arab migrants (aged 18 to 29) living in Romania. Findings reveal that the return to the home countries is not a valid option due to lack of security and stability. Instead, most young Arab migrants see their future in Romania thanks to better employment opportunities and living conditions. This also opens up the possibility of a transnational relationship between Romania and the sending countries, with the migrants settling in Romania on the long-term while also maintaining contact with the home countries thanks to improved transportation and communication technologies.

Keywords: migration, resilience, geopolitical perspectives, Arab migrants.

JEL Classification: F22, J15, J61, O15.

1. Introduction

As Mitchell (2018) remarked, the discipline of international relations or geopolitics by and large ignored migration for most of the 20th century, leaving it to other fields of economic or sociological interest. This research paper aims to fill part of this gap on geopolitics and international migration by looking at the strategic

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migration decisions and geopolitical perspectives reported by young Arab migrants living in an emerging destination country from Eastern Europe, Romania. In order to do this, we use Wallerstein's "World Systems Theory", separating between first world, second world and third world countries, in order to explain mobility flows. We consider migration as a geopolitical phenomenon, influencing both the decision to leave the native country, as well as the integration and development opportunities in the host country or other potential receiving countries.

We identify that Arab migrants from conflict areas develop a detachment from their home countries and an attachment to Romania, which makes them reinterpret geopolitical relations in a transnationalistic vein.

This study contributes to the Romanian migration literature in three ways. First, the study adds to Romanian migration research by departing from the previous, overused academic focus on outgoing migration; it does so by focusing its attention on incoming migration amongst young people of Arab origin. The research highlights the importance of considering various groups within migration studies and provides information on the experiences of young Arabs who move to Romania.

Second, the study demonstrates that transnationalism alters the ways in which young Arab migrants relate to their home countries and, in turn, also alters their perspectives on life or career possibilities.

Third, the study identifies the motivations or aspirations that lead young Arab migrants to make the choice of staying in Romania (i.e., attractive labour market, higher quality of life), as well as the downside of such decisions (i.e., inability to see family members).

By enlarging the scope of Romanian migration research towards incoming Arab migrants, this study contributes with valuable information not only to the local and international academia, but also to public or private policymakers.

2. Problem Statement

As Riaño (2022) observes, geopolitics are important when aiming to understand the choices of migrants or their resilience opportunities when migrants pursue the integration process in a welcoming country. Ashutosh and Mountz (2012) identified that the geopolitics of migration are produced from two sources: they everyday state practices in the home or in the host society, respectively, the strategies of migrants to move and resettle. Thus, the authors identify a microsocial, as well as a macrosocial dimension to the geopolitics of migration. Nevertheless, a vast majority of research mainly pleads for a macro perspective. Both Bernard et al. (2017) and Coddington et al. (2020), for example, believe that political control practices lead to transformations in migration patterns and in the wider geopolitical sphere (or lack of control practices, we might add, which conduct to chaos and crisis as triggers of migration, as viewed by Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014).

Délano (2009) observes that international migration is a result of a diadic relationship between host state and home state, as well as political interests, narratives, or traditions that might fit into the ecosystem of such international relations.

First and foremost, the role of Romania as a country of destination for international migrants needs to be understood in a geopolitical context. Bilger (2018) claims that Central and Eastern Europe (of which Romania is part) underwent profound geopolitical landscape transformations since the 1990s (fall of the Iron Curtain, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, transition from a planned economy to a free market economy, etc.), which gradually transformed this part of the continent into an attractive transit or host territory for international migrants. The democratic revolutions and the economic reforms of the early 1990s were followed by the integration into the European Union, which created new opportunities for cultural exchange, trade, or cooperation, also leveling economic disparities to other parts of the world.

Bilger continues by highlighting that, next to these geopolitical transformations of the CEE space, if one also considers the recent geopolitical tumultus in Arab countries (the Arab Spring protests, the Civil War in Syria etc.), then it should be no surprise that Central and Eastern European countries become a favoured destination for Arab migrants. Similarly, Syed Zwick (2022) points out that Arab migrants who left their home countries due to persecution or conflicts are more likely to pursue a migration path towards Europe.

This evolution of CEE countries into destinations for international migrants might well be what Mitchell and Sparke (2020: 1046) understand under “geopolitical constructions of safe space”: spaces (as countries) that offer enough security for migrants who want to flee from spaces of geopolitical conflicts (and yet do not have sufficient resources to make a living in a “core country”). A safer environment than at home, better living standards, and access to higher opportunities in terms of education or employment, makes Romania a targeted destination by Arab migrants (Cimpoeru et al., 2023).

3. Research Questions / Aims of the Research

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the geopolitical perspectives of young Arab migrants in Romania. We conceptualise the geopolitical perspectives as a construct based on Wallerstein’s “World Systems Theory”, according to which there is a geopolitical division of the world in core countries (first world), semi-periphery countries (second world), and periphery countries (third world) which may explain the mobility flows (Manafi et al., 2019). In light of this research paper, we consider migration as a geopolitical phenomenon in itself: following the logic of Vaidis and Otis (2020), international migration results from geopolitical conflicts that force populations to search for a better future abroad. Although we acknowledge that geopolitical conflicts are not the only factor determining international migration, we shall further conceptualise migration based on this idea of Vaidis and Otis which, if being added to Wallerstein’s Theory, leads us to the following assumptions, which we shall also use as hypotheses of the research:

H1: Geopolitical conflicts (apud. Vaidis, Otis, 2020) force populations of periphery countries (apud. Wallerstein) to move to semi-periphery countries such as Romania;

H2: Once arrived in Romania, migrant populations will evaluate their perspectives still based on a structural/geopolitical comparative analysis of conflicts (dangers) and opportunities between the host country (Romania), the home country and other potential receiving countries.

While accepting these research hypotheses, if Romania is to be seen in this research paper as a nexus of migrant decision-making, then we also need to highlight the geopolitical and geographical role of Romania (a return to Ravenstein's roots of migration theory, some might argue, yet of utmost importance for understanding the findings of this research): Romania is positioned between sending countries to its east and powerful receiving countries to its west. This positioning meant that, for a considerable period of time, mainly during the 1990s, 2000s, and the first half of the 2010s, Romania played the role of a transit country. However, the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015 easily started to change Romania's role in the international migration marketplace. At the request of the European Union, the Romanian Government gradually increased the quotas of third-country workers admitted to the domestic labour market, from 5,500 in 2015 to 100,000 each in 2022 and 2023. According to the most recent available data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there were 705,000 international citizens living in Romania in 2020 (roughly 3.7 per cent of the total population). With such figures, Romania should also be regarded as a destination country, not only as a transit country, and, in such a case, its geopolitical implications in the lives of migrants should be considered. The growing number of migrants living in Romania strengthens Skeldon and Walton-Roberts' (2000) idea that Eastern Europe is an emerging core (or a potential core): a first-world in the making, which involves that such countries are no longer to be seen as transit country for migrants, but actually as attractive destination countries. However, the same authors continue, due to persisting structural imbalances, such societies risk to be confined to their semi-peripheral condition.

Therefore, our research question asks what are the geopolitical perspectives of young Arab migrants in Romania? In the attempt to provide an answer to this question, the research paper emphasises a transnationalistic view that is set to configure the geopolitical relations between Romania and the sending Arab countries based on a set of social, economic, political, etc. events unfolding here and there. The question is centered around the possibility of re-migration (return of young Arab migrants to their native countries) versus the possibility to continue their lives in Romania or in other parts of Western Europe. Thus, geopolitical perspectives are herein envisioned around the structural relationship between host and home countries. As shall be seen, although migration ultimately remains an individual choice of the migrant, the wider, macro-, and structural conditions of either the home or the host country cannot be removed from the discussion that shapes the geopolitical perspectives for migrants.

4. Research Methods

This paper results from the research work in the EU Horizon 2020 project “EMpowerment through liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in vulnerable conditions (MIMY)” (EU funding under grant agreement number 870700).

The study takes the form of a qualitative research. Data was collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews that had the aim to investigate the subjective responses of young Arab migrants living in Romania. One of the advantages of using semi-structured interviews is that they allow the capture of detailed insights from migrants who went through particular situations in their lives, which is of utmost importance when conducting research on Arab migrants, since many of them come from war-torn countries such as Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan, or from countries with peculiar economic situations.

Data was collected between January 2020 and November 2021, thus overlapping with the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed some issues and forced the research team to conduct most of the interviews online, per Zoom.

The overarching goal of the MIMY research project was to provide a better understanding of the vulnerabilities and resilience mechanisms of young migrants in Europe (in the scope of the project, young being defined as aged between 18 and 29), hence what motivated the choice of using semi-structured interviews, as through them participants to the study were encouraged to openly share their views on their vulnerabilities, as well as resilience mechanisms. There were 20 interviews conducted with Arab migrants in Romania (9 males and 11 females).

In the upcoming sections of this paper, a coding system is going to be used in order to protect the identities of the respondents. The coding model is [MY1_RO_Bucharest_m], whereby “MY1” represents the chronological order in which the interviews took place (in this example, we would talk about the first interview in the list), then “Bucharest” or “Iasi” shows the city of the migrant’s residence (these were the two sites where interviews were conducted), while “m” or “f” shows the gender.

One of the challenges met during the data collection period was that, due to the COVID-19 related restrictions, the authors were faced with some difficulties in identifying respondents, because access to various institutions working with Arab migrants was limited. Eventually, participants were identified through either formal or informal networks. Further on, several gender-related differences were observed, as women were more open toward participating in interviews than men were, which is also an explanation of the slightly higher number of female respondents.

Table 1 offers a demographic presentation of the 20 interviewees, with their respective gender (“m” of “f” in the code), age (at the moment of the interview), country of origin, length of residency in Romania and professional status (at the moment of the interview).

Table 1. Demographic presentation of the interviewees

Code	Age	Home Country	Years in Romania	Status at Time of Interview
MY1_RO_Bucharest_f	26	Syria	3 years, 6 months	Student, employed
MY2_RO_Bucharest_f	28	Sudan	5 years	Student, unemployed
MY3_RO_Bucharest_f	20	Syria	8 years	Student, unemployed
MY4_RO_Bucharest_f	20	Cameroon	2 years	Student, unemployed
MY5_RO_Bucharest_f	29	Algeria	2 years	Student, unemployed
MY6_RO_Bucharest_f	21	Syria	4 years	Student, unemployed
MY7_RO_Bucharest_f	27	Azerbaijan	1 years	Student, unemployed
MY8_RO_Bucharest_f	20	Yemen	1 years	Student, unemployed
MY9_RO_Bucharest_f	20	Afghanistan	4 years	Student, unemployed
MY10_RO_Bucharest_f	21	Lebanon	4 years	Graduate, employed
MY11_RO_Bucharest_f	24	Sudan	1 year, 2 months	Student, employed
MY12_RO_Bucharest_m	30	Syria	1 year, 6 months	Graduate, employed
MY13_RO_Bucharest_m	30	Syria	6 months	Graduate, employed
MY14_RO_Bucharest_m	28	Syria	4 years	Student, unemployed
MY15_RO_Bucharest_m	29	Syria	3 years	Graduate, employed
MY16_RO_Bucharest_m	26	Yemen	4 years	Student, employed
MY17_RO_Bucharest_m	21	Palestine	6 years	Student, unemployed
MY18_RO_Bucharest_m	20	Lebanon	3 years	Student, unemployed
MY19_RO_Bucharest_m	20	Afghanistan	1 year, 2 months	Student, unemployed
MY20_RO_Bucharest_m	23	Yemen	2 years	Student, employed

Source: Own collection of data from the interviews.

5. Findings

Most of the migrants interviewed reported that they see their future in Romania since here they have more career opportunities than in the native countries. Although the return to the home countries was regarded by many as an emotional choice, the rational decision made the migrants decide not to return to the native countries, but pursue a career in Romania. The decision to continue their careers in Romania was mainly influenced by two socio-economic factors: that the labour market in Romania is far more appealing than the one in the native country and also the fact that migrants saw Romania as a developing country, a status out of which they believed that even more opportunities might arise. Such preferences for labour market access opportunities are confirmed by the findings of Temel and Aca (2022), who show that the increased mobility of Arab migrants is largely determined by the opportunities on the European labour markets.

One of the research findings was that some of the migrants considered it an advantage that Romania was still a „second-world” country and not yet a fully developed, „first-world” country such as Western-European states. Most of them associated this status of Romania with a better quality of life, better living opportunities, and a faster and easier integration:

“In other (more developed) countries in Europe, there are a lot of migrants. They are there from a longer time period 20-30 years, from the first time war erupted in Afghanistan. Now they have a better life. If I had gone to countries

like Germany or Sweden, it would have been more difficult to be successful” (MY9_RO_Bucharest_f)

“There are stories of Syrians aiming to go to Germany. They ask me if I want to go there, since I obtained my paper. But I do not want. For them it is just a trend, but for one of my age, a stable living style is perfect. I like Romania, I’ve come to love the country, I want [to obtain] the Romanian nationality. Here it is cheap [to live], Germany is much more expensive than Romania, even if they pay you more. In Romania, the economy is sustainable; for my offspring it is a better opportunity. For them to settle in, to grow, to blend in to society, [here it] is better. I want to stay here, to work, to integrate. The trend is Germany, they [other Syrians, n.a.] go to Germany, they do not read information about the country, they use only Facebook for information, that’s way they do not integrate” (MY15_RO_Bucharest_m)

“My brother told me to move to him [in Norway, n.a.], but I think it is hard to move to another country, to try again. I got used here, I got used to work, to the language, to the stability, and it seems very hard after all these years to move to another country, to start over, to learn the language again [...]. Especially since I have one more year and I can apply for citizenship” (MY14_RO_Bucharest_m)

“I am sometimes afraid to hear something bad about my family, now or in the future. Other than that... about my job I am not afraid, because that depends on me, on my study, on how hard I work. I am afraid to still feel this loneliness, to still feel empty. If I go to live in another country, I am going to feel the same, or I am not going to find the right partner to spend my time with, and I am going to feel like nothing changed, like I’m still empty from the inside” (MY18_RO_Bucharest_m)

As mentioned, the opportunity cost of the decision to stay in Romania on the long term is given by the inability to see family members in the future. Even so, for Arab migrants at least, the decision to continue in Romania was made easy when compared to the conflict situations in war-torn home countries, which Arab migrants wanted to avoid at any price, for them and for their children:

“I want to make sure that my kids don’t leave in a war zone country. That’s definitely a priority when choosing the country, for sure, 100 % sure. Even if this means giving up my studies. You never know when war hits you, nobody knows it” (MY3_RO_Bucharest_f)

Thus, returning to the home country is not a valid option for Arab migrants, as it is associated with lack of security and stability, a fact also confirmed by Vesek (2021). As one of the migrants mentioned, he might visit his home country for a short period on a holiday, but resting there is not a choice since there is no future there because of the war:

“I can go back to Syria only for visiting; even if I go back, I have nothing to do there, there is no future in Syria” (MY14_RO_Bucharest_m).

Despicable realities in some Arab countries such as Syria or Afghanistan made migration to Romania become an opportunity to escape pressure caused by military, economic, political or social circumstances in the home countries (Faraj, 2022). Although, at the end of the day, migration remains a personal decision, the fact that several interviewees mentioned that they would not return to their home countries

but, instead, pursue a career in Romania also leads to a structural dimension of migration, which places Romania and the home countries in a Wallerstein-like world system that brings along the question of geopolitical perspectives for migrants.

Moreover, the statement made by [MY14_RO_Bucharest_m] is in line with recent findings of Bilecen (2022), who shows that the everincreasing transnationalism substantially changes the ways migrants relate to their home countries and the ways in which they perceive re-migration: while transportation and communication technologies improve, return migration tends to become even more cyclical (“*I can go back to Syria only for visiting*”) rather than permanent, with migrants preferring to settle in the receiving country and to maintain occasional ties to their home country.

As a result, migrants often shift their loyalty towards the host country, becoming more involved in local community life or in social activities. For example, one participant to this study opened an “Arab Cultural Center” in her city of residence in central Romania. Such a civic engagement demonstrates the changing nature of global migration in light of transnational behaviour: migrants are no longer simply passive recipients of the host country’s culture, but they actually become active social agents who contribute to redefining identities, by matching the cultures of destination and of origin.

The recent 2023 Turkey – Syria earthquake in February revealed yet another facet that makes more and more Arab migrants adopt a transnationalistic stance with respect to geopolitical perspectives to the home countries, namely the peculiarities of the humanitarian aid sector in Syria, but, by extrapolation, in other Arab countries as well. The earthquake unfortunately showed that some Arab countries cannot handle such major catastrophes or events; in this context, returning migration to the home countries would do nothing else than to increase the pressure on an already weak aid system (Oxford Analytica, 2021), and hence why many migrants prefer long-term residence in the receiving country.

Many migrants interviewed made it clear that the obtainment of a permanent residency permit and Romanian citizenship is an objective for the future, which is an indication that they see their future in Romania (MY15_RO_Bucharest_m, MY14_RO_Bucharest_m). Acquiring legal status becomes synonym with an extension of the period of stay in Romania. As demonstrated by other studies, the longer the of duration of the stay of Arab migrants in the host country, the higher their desire to remain there (Vesek, 2021). Therefore, we believe that (local) governments or public authorities, in order to be able to design policies beneficial to both the migrants and the host country, need to take into account this changing nature of transnationalism and the ways in which Arab migrants immerse themselves in the local societies, by mixing forms of social and cultural involvement.

6. Conclusions

Framing the analysis of the Arab ethnics’ migration to Romania within a geopolitical perspective helped us reveal the complexity of decision-making associated with international migration. Beyond individual experiences, our research

shows, migrants make decisions on whether to stay or to move back or further away by pursuing comparative analyses between their current place of residence (Romania) and their home country or another potential host society. Variables in the decision-making process include family, friends, opportunities for labour market access, political situations, etc.

Our findings revealed that Arab migrants from conflict areas developed a detachment from their home countries and an attachment to Romania, which made them reinterpret geopolitical relations between the sending countries and the receiving country in the light of transnationalist behaviour: re-migration to the home countries is only seen as a temporary solution (i.e., short visits on holidays), while the long-term future is understood to be in Romania (thanks to better living opportunities, easier labour market access, etc.). While temporary visits to the home country may offer a short sense of comfort by rejoining with family members or friends, this is not seen as a long-term solution once migrants have settled in the Romanian society, not is re-migration to another host country, as this move is associated with supplementary difficulties and re-adaptation challenges (MY14, MY15, MY18).

Re-migration becomes even more difficult when the Arab migrants settle in the Romanian society by learning the language and adapting to the cultural norms (*“I think it is hard to move to another country, to try again. I got used here, I got used to work, to the language, to the stability, and it seems very hard after all these years to move to another country, to start over, to learn the language again”*). Once such forms of acculturation occur, migrants tend to develop more serious plans of settling in permanently.

The implications of this research paper for policy-makers are diverse. Considering that the number of Arab migrants in Romania is increasing, such a trend should be used to strengthen economic and political ties between Romania and MENA countries, or, as Castles (1999) pointed out, international migration should be used as an opportunity for (geopolitical) cooperation and development.

Acknowledgment

This research paper is based on findings obtained in the EU Horizon 2020 research project “Empowerment through Liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in Vulnerable Conditions (MIMY)” (Grant Agreement No. 870700, <https://doi.org/10.3030/870700>). The interview guides were created by the project colleagues from Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) and subsequently applied within each country participating in the project. In Romania, the interviews were carried out in either English, Arabic or Romanian.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders did not participate in designing and writing this research paper, nor in the decision to publish the results at ICESS 2023.

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