Social integration and civic participation among the immigrants in Romania

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Abstract

While most of the studies on the topic of human population movement depict Romania as an emigration country, official statistics reveal that, during the past years, the number of temporary or permanent immigrants in Romania has increased continuously. One of the points of great interest in the academic research linked to migration is represented by the level social integration of immigrants. While civic participation is merely a dimension of integration, we argue that analyzing its evolution, correlated with the evolution in the number of immigrants, can contribute to a better understanding of the situation of these people, thus creating a functional framework for integrating them. Previous studies reveal the fact that civic participation of immigrants, especially regarding political interest, raises many issues in most of the countries, mostly due to the fact that they rarely benefit from any kind of political rights, and their civic representation is often rather precarious.

Keywords: *immigration; integration; Romania; civic participation; political rights*

1. Emigration and immigration in Romania

Although Romania is predominantly a source country for emigrants, the immigration phenomenon is also a significant influence on the Romanian society, as it results in the need to integrate those arriving in our country. The National Institute of Statistics reveals that "Romania continues to be a country of emigration, the phenomenon of emigration being the second biggest cause of the country's population decline. The balance of international migration in 2016 was negative, with the number of migrants exceeding the number of immigrants with over 76,000 people" (National Institute of Statistics 2018: p. 2).

According to the National Strategy regarding immigration, legal migration must be the result of the common will of the migrant and of the receiving Member State, both for the benefit of the State of origin, in the context of circular migration. "Romania implements a specific immigration policy according to the needs identified

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at national level and at the same time concentrated, taking into account its impact on the other EU Member States, while ensuring equal treatment of immigrants and their harmonious integration into the host society" (Strategia nationala… 2015).

During the past ten years, as the table below indicates, more than 230. 000 people have permanently migrated to Romania, thus creating the need for legal institutions, social spaces and a coherent plan to be integrated into the life in Romania.

Table no. 1. Total amount of permanent immigrants in Romania, 2007-2017

Year	Total amount of immigrants
2007	9575
2008	10030
2009	8606
2010	7059
2011	15538
2012	21684
2013	23897
2014	36644
2015	23093
2016	27863
2017	50199

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania

Romania has had legislation in the field of integration since 2004. The main attributions in this area are given to certain ministries and local authorities. However, the legislation in the field of migration is under continuous improvement, so, it is likely that the legislation will undergo some changes in the near future. In Romania, each institutional actor (Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Labor and Social Justice, Ministry of Health, etc.) is responsible for the integration of foreigners in its field of activity, coordinating and monitoring the policy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the General Inspectorate for Immigration (IGI), which also has the task of providing, through its regional structures, specific services to facilitate the integration into Romanian society of different categories of foreigners.

Institutional coordination is mainly done through meetings with stakeholders (organized on the basis of the National Immigration Strategy) and expert meetings (regularly organized by the General Inspectorate for Immigration through the Asylum and Integration Directorate). The measures provided by the law to achieve integration refer, on the one hand, to facilitating access to a range of economic and social rights, such as the right to a job, housing, the right to education, the right to health care and social assistance, and, on the other hand, the implementation of integration programs (specific activities of cultural orientation, counseling and learning of the Romanian language).

Government Ordinance no.44/ 2004 on the social integration of foreigners who have obtained a form of protection in Romania, as amended and completed, defines

social integration as the process of active participation of foreigners who have acquired a form of protection or a right of residence in Romania and citizens of the Member States of the European Union and the European Economic Area to the economic, social and cultural life of the Romanian society, in order to prevent social marginalization, respectively in order to adapt to the conditions of the Romanian society.

The general policy objective of integrating foreigners who have obtained a form of protection in Romania is to help them self-support, become independent of state assistance or non-governmental organizations, and actively participate in economic, social and cultural life.

To this end, the General Inspectorate for Immigration, through Regional Centers, supports these people by offering a package of services reunited in the Integration Program. The Integration Program offers: accommodation on request in the centers of the General Inspectorate for Immigrants for the period during which the person is enrolled in the integration program (up to 12 months), Romanian language courses, during the period of the person enrolling in the integration program (up to 12 months), organized with the support of the school inspectorates; cultural accommodation sessions; granting, for a period of 2 months, material assistance equal to that provided for asylum seekers; social counseling that includes ensuring access to their rights in Romania: the right to a job, the right to housing, the right to health and social care, social security, the right to education; counseling and psychological support; a non-refundable grant amounting to 540 lei/ person, granted for a maximum of 12 months, provided that they enroll in and participate in the activities of the integration program and set out in the integration plan (according to the information available at http://igi.mai.gov.ro/ro/content/programul-de-integrare).

After the completion of the program, financial support for the payment of accommodation outside the Center can be claimed by settling up to 50% of the accommodation costs for a maximum of one year. Three types of activities are offered within the integration program: Romanian language learning courses, cultural accommodation sessions and counseling activities (Witec and Berbec 2018: p. 4).

2. The civic participation dimension of social integration

Social integration of immigrants is a wide topic, addressing several aspects, such as: education, language skills, engagement in civic activities, culture etc. In this context, civic participation is merely a dimension of integration, an expression of the different type of routes immigrants can choose to integrate more easily in the host societies. The social reality, both in Romania and other European countries, reveals the fact that civic representation of immigrants is often precarious and raises many issues in most of the countries, mostly due to the fact that they rarely benefit from any kind of political rights.

Thus, civic participation can be defined as the ways in which migrants can act like citizens, taking into account the fact that they do not have the national citizenship, and, therefore, traditional political participation methods are not available for them (Gsir 2015: p. 2). Carrera defines civic integration as an expression of immigrant incorporation in a recipient country, which, in addition to economic and political integration, also includes individual commitment to the knowledge, norms and traditions that characterize the host country (Carrera 2006).

In a study published in 2009, comparing four member states of the European Union on measures adopted for the civic integration of third-country nationals (referred to in the report as TCNs), it is noted that "The promotion of civic integration policies by some EU member states has also taken place through the exchange of 'good practices' and 'lessons learned' among member states representatives in the scope of the EU Framework on Integration as well as the financial support provided by the European integration fund. The common EU immigration policy is thus granting an increasingly prominent role to civic integration programs and policies for TCNs" (Carrera and Wiesbrock 2009: p. 39).

Civic integration (CIP) policies can be defined as a "particular set of policy instruments and integration requirements, specifically country knowledge and language skills, that are conditional towards various legal statuses, for example, at entry and for long-term residence. The strategies used to enhance civic integration are conducted through tests that examine language skills, country knowledge and social values. The character and scope of CIPs differ between countries. However, one prominent factor that unites some countries is the conditionality integrated into some of these policies" (Ahlen and Borang 2018: p. 4).

Political participation of immigrants is a disputed topic, because they usually don't have political rights, and the situations when they benefit from the existence of strong consultation groups are also rare (MIPEX 2015). Furthermore, there is a great diversity among the political participation of immigrants in some countries of Western and Eastern Europe, where migrants can only engage in political activities after obtaining citizenship.

Regarding the nature of engagement of immigrants in political activities, scholars concerned with the topic highlight the difference between political participation and involvement in other kind of civic activities. While political participation implies the existence of a direct contribution to the political decision making process, either by voting, or by undertaking other kind of political activities, such as registering in a political party, engaging in campaigns, or reaching out to a politician, civic participation regards the range of activities that do not have the capacity to directly influence the political decisions. However, civic participation, too, has the ability to influence the political decision making process, although not directly.

Learning the language and having basic knowledge about the host country are basic requirements to gain independence and self-support, and to become part of the local community. They also represent a means for immigrants to regain their security, dignity and self-esteem. There are a number of factors that can affect the ability of immigrants to learn the language or culture of the host country, including education followed and familiarity with the school environment, age, sex, physical and mental health, family responsibilities and economic or housing circumstances. The cultural context in which the integration processes take place is also very important, as culture is a "central factor for the developing of contemporary societies is also favored by the globalization of economies and the rise of the production and communication means" (Niță and Ilie Goga 2018: p. 9). External factors may be related to the availability of qualified staff, to the extent to which the analytical curriculum covers the needs of migrants with educational needs and the availability of support systems that offer people the opportunity to participate in language courses and cultural orientation, including childcare, transport

costs or appropriate income support. In this regarded, some studies reveal the fact that "the welfare system is not prepared to face today challenges" (Şerban 2017: p. 378) in many of the European countries, as the immigrants usually need at least the same amount of assistance, especially if they find themselves in a special situation.

Regarding the people that benefit from refugee treatment, designated international documents include provisions regarding the measures that are to be taken by states in order to help them integrate. In this regard, UNCHR has established a series of Common Fundamental Principles on Integration of Immigrants (UNCHR 2009: p. 26) that identify, for instance, frequent interactions between migrants and citizens as fundamental mechanisms of integration and encourages participation of immigrants in the democratic process, as well as the formulation of measures and policies related to integration. Furthermore, the topic of civic participation is also dealt with by the European Commission in the Handbook on Integration for policy-makers and practitioners. UNHCR considers integration of refugees a dynamic, multifaceted and bidirectional process calls for efforts from all parties involved, including refugee availability to adapt to the host society without giving up their former cultural identity as well and the mutual availability of host communities and public institutions to receive refugees and face the needs of a diverse community.

The Convention on the Status of Refugees presents a series of targeted social and economic rights in the direction of the integration process. These include freedom of movement, access to education and to the labor market, access to aid and social assistance, including medical facilities, the possibility of acquire and dispose of properties and ability to travel with valid identity documents and travel. Moreover, in Article 34, it requires states to facilitate integration and access to citizenship for refugees. The UNHCR Executive Committee has admitted that the process of local integration is complex and gradual, having three distinct but interlinked dimensions, namely legal, economic and socio-cultural, all of which are important for the integration capacity of refugees as members with rights full of society (UNCHR 2009).

UNHCR has also been concerned about the lack of involvement of refugees in designing, implementing or evaluation of integration programs and activities in Central Europe. Regarding participation in larger social or political processes, many refugees remain prisoners at the edge of the host society, lacking the knowledge and means to take part in local, regional or national processes. In some countries, in the absence of voting rights and the possibility to run for local or regional functions, some refugees may wait for long periods of time and go through complex procedures until they are granted citizenship and implicitly the right to take part in official political processes.

Integration is an interactive process involving both immigrants, citizens and institutions in the host country. The end result is the creation of a society that is both diversified and open, where people can form a community despite the differences between them.

3. The situation of immigrants in Romania
Cultural differences have always been a barrier to the integration of foreigners, and one of the most important ones. In Romania cultural accommodation courses for foreign citizens are being organized, aimed at facilitating the process of integrating them from a cultural point of view and adapting them to the Romanian society.

The integration indicators used for the civic participation dimension of social integration in most of the studies that approach this topic (MIPEX 2015, OECD 2015, Radu 2017) include three main levels. First, locally, the involvement of migrants in civil society organizations in the host country is being evaluated. Secondly, involvement of immigrants with organizations of migrants that militate for migrant's integration in the host country regard the trans-national level of integration, and, thirdly, assessing the involvement with organizations that deal with situations in their country of origin, mainly in the context of globalism and transnationalism

Regarding the trans-national and international dimensions of integration, there are two perspectives for analyzing bi and multinational organizations. One approach states they can harm integration, mainly due to the fact that the participants can be perceived as loyal to the state of origin, which can threat integration (Portes 1999: 472). The other one, on the contrary, claims that they can facilitate integration, because they cause immigrants to act first based on their ethnicity, in time, becoming involved citizens in the country of destination. Research has shown that transnational civic participation has had a positive impact on civic participation in the country of destination (Fox and Bada 2011: pp. 147-148).

A study released in 2011 (Alexe and Paunescu 2011), regarding the integration of immigrants in Romania and the instruments meant to facilitate integration reveals the restrains of the locals regarding the efforts they are supposed to make in order to help the foreigners accommodate more easily. Some of the responses in that study help create a multidimensional picture of the sociologic context in which these integration efforts take place: "The differences are up to the gestural language... Differences created by religion, religious systems, I believe that religion has a great importance on the formation of man" (interview, public institution).

Other respondents believe that stereotypes exist in all countries, and that the Romanian society would need better communication in general: "We need better communication, we Romanians have no communication within our family, why should we have it with foreigners "(interview, international organization)

Moldovan students studying in Romania explained there are no big differences in the cultural relations between them and the Romanians here, especially as they speak Romanian and have a common history to the Romanians, which contributes significantly to their integration (Alexe and Paunescu 2011: p. 391).

Civic participation is important in the process of migrants' integration, both due to the social interaction it involves, and also due to its political and social efficiency. Migrants that get civically engaged are considered better integrated than those who do not belong to such organizations.

However, many immigrants find it difficult to establish close relations to the population in the host community, and, with the assistance of modern long-distance fast communication channels, they can keep in touch with their families or friends left at home. Migrants confess that that in many cases, institutions and organizations are not sources of information for them, but most often appeal to friends, knowledge, people in the community and employers. Of they also say, they do not watch Romanian TV stations and the press (due to the lack of knowledge of the Romanian language). Instead, use the internet often, anyway chosen to track news from their home country and communicate with family or friends remaining in the country. For some, their

country's embassy in Romania is a source of information for issues related to legal residence rights, visas, employment opportunities and others (Alexe and Paunescu 2011: p. 392).

The Internet is, according to foreign students' statements, an important source of information for them, especially with regard to information on transport possibilities, of accommodation and employment, communication with family and friends through networks socializing, accessing information on cultural life and leisure.

The conclusions of the research on the civic participation dimension of integration in the Index of immigrants` integration in Romania (Radu 2017: pp. 117-118), concerning civic participation, trust in institutions and participation associated to the phenomenon of transnationalism, the image depicted is complex: "approximately 35% of the immigrants are involved in student organizations, over 30% in education, art and music organizations and over 25% in home country organizations. The least popular organizations are trade unions and professional associations. High participation in student organizations can be explained by the generous offer of participation in various associations existing among universities".

4. Conclusions

Civic participation of migrants is very important for the integration process, as it creates the channels for a direct transfer of their needs towards the authorities involved in the decision-making process. Several studies have revealed the fact that civic (and political) participation facilitates the contact between migrants and locals, thus having a significant socializing role (Lindekilde 2009). Furthermore, in the absence of any kind of political rights for non-citizen residents, civic participation of migrants increases their political efficiency, providing them opportunities to express their needs.

Although numerous programs and projects are aimed at creating context for immigrants to integrate better from the social perspective, to participate, the possibility to measure how efficient they actually are in the process in very small. "There are a number of indicators that could be used to measure civic commitment. Examples include: membership of community associations, sporting or leisure activities, neighborhood committees, trade unions, political parties, and volunteer activities. Going out with friends is also a good indicator of social integration. However, everyday life surveys gather little data for such indicators. Their questions usually focus on the mere fact of participation, not on the actual scope of engagement" (OECD 2015: p. 208). Furthermore, some of the actors involved in this process state that civic integration policies and the ways they are being enforced in some countries can easily be considered immigration control in disguise (Ahle and Borang 2018).

However, the issue of how cultural, spiritual or educational differences can be overcome in order to achieve a multicultural, homogenous society remains. The policies and tools of civic integration are designed to support both the new comers and the locals as well, by building bridges enabled to shorten the social distance. But this is not a goal that can be achieved in a short period of time, but rather a continuous, mutual effort, which engages all the parties involved in the process, not only the immigrants. Constructing institutional tools and social places that can facilitate this process is not only the state`s responsibility, but also one of the local communities, which, in turn, can benefit from the presence of immigrants.

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