FIELDWORK BRIEF

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS IN MARAMUREȘ

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the context of the MIGRADEMO project, this brief presents selected descriptive findings from our fieldwork in Romania based on qualitative research methods. The fieldwork examines the complex dynamics of international migration, remittances, and return migration. Focused on two communities in Romania, the study includes 50 interviews with returned migrants and individuals in households with family members residing abroad. Our preliminary analysis shows that people in the region mainly migrate to northern Italy for employment opportunities. Due to long work hours, most migrants had limited political and civic participation in their host countries. Financial remittances are not frequently mentioned, but for those who do report receiving it, it is considered an important contribution in Romania. Social remittances are mentioned as contributing to knowledge transfer between migrants and their relatives but can also be contested.

INTRODUCTION

Both international migration and development are important contemporary academic and policy concerns. Recent studies of transnational migrant practices have uncovered how migrants influence democratic participation in their homelands through the remittance of both money and newfound ideas about democracy from afar or through return. The MIGRADEMO project seeks to unpack these processes at the level of the political elite, civil society, and among households in regions of high outmigration. This brief focuses on how **processes of return**, as well as reception of **financial and social remittances**, are perceived and negotiated among returnees and members of households with family members living abroad.

The fieldwork took place in **two localities in the county of Maramureș** in the north of Romania. One of these areas is a larger former mining town with a population of roughly 28,000 and an emigration rate of 23% (INS 2020). The other smaller place is a village of 2,300 people, which experienced a similarly high emigration rate. These two localities were selected not only due to their similar rates of and reasons for emigration but also due to their differences in terms of partisan preferences at the local level. The mayor of the smaller locality belongs to a party that emerged in recent years to challenge the two mainstream parties of the centre-left (PSD) and the centre-right (PNL). In the larger town, despite the arrival of a new administration largely composed of migrants and returnees in 2012, the former political establishment has regained power.

We conducted **semi-structured interviews** with a total of **50 participants**, divided into two groups: 27 returnees and 23 individuals with migrant relatives. The returnee group comprised 16 males and 11 females, whereas the group with migrant relatives included 6 males and 16 females (see: Figure 1). The field work was undertaken by Dr. Vladimir Bortun after several pre-trips to confirm the locations. Dr. Vladimir, a Romanian national, used various strategies to reach out to the interviewees during his multiple visits to the two sites of the fieldwork, such as identifying key informants and snowball sampling.

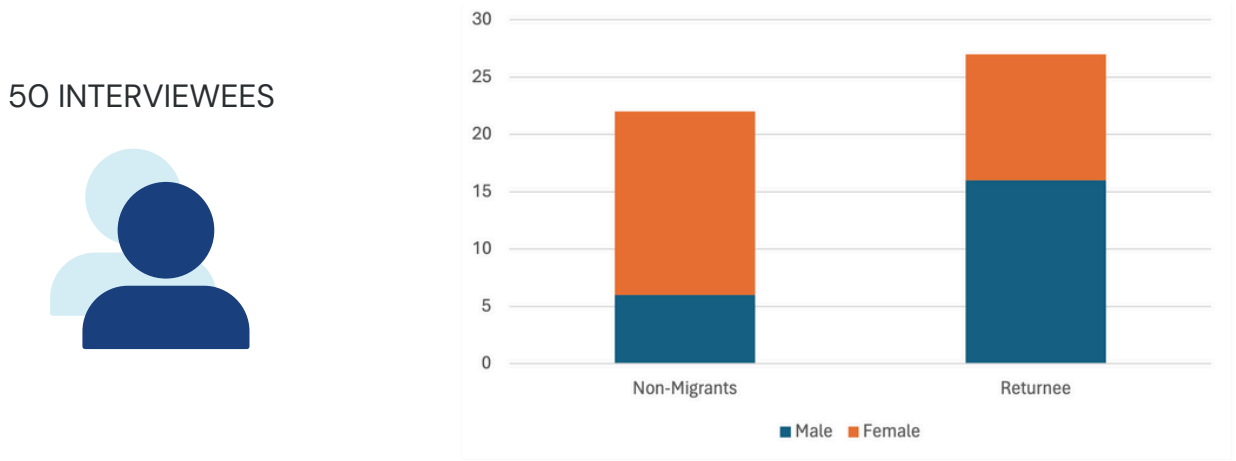

Fig. 1. Characteristics of the interviewees

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Emigration from Romania initially began in the late 1980s through political asylum. It was only after the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989 that emigration from Romania escalated significantly (Andrén and Roman, 2014). Currently, Romania boasts the largest population of working-age migrants among all EU member states, standing at 27% as of 2022 (Hassan et al., 2023: 11). According to our interviews, the primary destinations for Romanian migrants include **Northern Italy**, followed by a couple of interviewees migrating to the **United Kingdom** and **Germany**. Romania has one of the highest rates of returnees compared to other member states (Hassan et al., 2023: 28).

The interviewees who had previous migration experience highlighted how the **temporal junctures of border control** influenced the nature of the migration experience. The majority of the interviewees moved from 2000 onwards through legal routes. In contrast, the few interviewees who migrated during the 1990s often embarked on a more challenging journey. In both the localities under scrutiny, the prospects of a better life and wealthier economic conditions were the key drivers for emigration, especially before and some years after the end of the USSR regime. In particular, according to the interviewees, a crucial event triggering the emigration flow in these cities was the **shutting down of the local mine** in 1997, which led to widespread job cuts over the years. **Economic needs** and **family reunification** are among the main drivers for migration identified in the interviews.

Other reasons for emigration include the desire to avoid military enrolment, dissatisfaction with the administration in their home city (for example, due to inadequate infrastructure), lack of trust in public institutions, corruption, and clientelism.

As the majority of returnees have a positive perception of their migration experience, it is important to note that the main reason for their decision to return was to be **reunited with their families in their home country**. Other common reasons for returning included feelings of **longing and nostalgia**, coupled with **difficulties in adjusting to the new environment**. Additionally, some returnees mentioned their desire to **open a business in their home country** as an important motivation for return.

Fig. 2: Map showing where Maramureș is located in Romania.

(RE)SOCIALISATION ABROAD

In terms of resocialisation, **three main types of interactions** were observed among returnees: interactions with locals (including employers, colleagues, and public institutions), interactions with other Romanians, and interactions with foreigners. Among these three types, the most frequently mentioned was the interaction with the local population.

The majority of returnees had positive experiences and interactions with the local population, expressing gratitude for the support they received during their integration process. They specifically appreciated the assistance and guidance provided in relation to work opportunities and felt a sense of welcome and acceptance as members of the society. These **positive interactions with the local population** contributed to a successful and smooth integration experience for the returnees.

ECONOMIC REMITTANCES

Most returnees regularly sent **money and goods** home, especially if they have children. However, our interviews with individuals with relatives abroad show that they only receive financial remittances **from time to time** from their children or siblings.

For interviewees with relatives abroad, the support received from family members abroad is **not consistent** but provided according to specific needs. Families with children receive more consistent aid for education, healthcare, and daily expenses, depending on the family's financial capacity abroad. The primary focus of financial support is on **immediate family members**, especially children, rather than broader political or civic causes.

There are fewer instances where returnees reported interacting with other Romanians or migrants from other countries. Some returnees expressed a preference to avoid interactions with both Romanians and other immigrants due to the negative perception that the local population in the host countries has about them.

Returnees highlight that **long work hours** prevented them from participating in political and civic life while abroad. Still, a few interviewees mentioned seizing opportunities for **volunteering**.

Fig. 3: Photo taken by our research team, showing a money transfer center in Romania.

SOCIAL REMITTANCES

Social remittances, which involve the transfer of knowledge, ideas, and practices, contribute to changes in the knowledge and/or perspectives of migrants' relatives in Romania.

Our interviews with both returnees and individuals from abroad illustrate that the extent of such knowledge transfer can vary, being influenced by multiple factors. One factor is that **communication between migrants living abroad and their relatives and friends in Romania** primarily revolves around day-to-day family matters such as the education of their children back home, often conducted through regular WhatsApp conversations and any occasional visits, particularly after Romania joined the EU and travel restrictions were lifted. However, a couple of returnees mentioned **engaging in discussions on local or national politics** with their families in Romania while they were residing abroad.

In discussions with individuals who have relatives abroad regarding perspectives on elections, democracy, gender, environment, immigration, and the diaspora, some interviewees expressed that their relatives have changed in some respects, while others do not observe such change. For instance, in terms of **environmental awareness**, some individuals with relatives abroad highlight the knowledge transfer regarding recycling.

However, the majority do not have such an impact because of the changing behaviours of their relatives when they are back in Romania. While their relatives are often exposed to different attitudes and behaviours regarding environmental protection in their country of destination, pon returning to Romania, some of them may forget or neglect these environmentally conscious attitudes and behaviours.

In terms of the issue of **gender equality**, many returnees and individuals with family abroad highlighted that migration experience in Europe brings about change in gender relations, empowering women to make more independent choices in their personal and professional life (e.g., getting a divorce or joining the labour market).

Fig. 4: Photo taken by our research team, showing recyling bins in the localities under scrutiny.

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