



FIELDWORK BRIEF

# MIGRATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS IN ROMANIA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the context of the MIGRADEMO project, this report presents selected descriptive findings from our research on the extent to and ways in which the role of returnee leaders of associations link their international migration experience to their entry into and engagement with civil society. A core component of this inquiry is 17 semi-structured interviews with returnees working with civil society organisations in Romania. Our preliminary analysis indicates that these civil society leaders recognise the impact of their migration experience on their perceptions, knowledge, skills, and transnational network upon their return to Romania. Although some of them can implement what they learned and observed abroad, interviewees also reflect on the obstacles they face in doing so.

## INTRODUCTION

Both international migration and democratic 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 deals with the level of **civil society in Romania**. Our research focuses on how the migration experience of heads of civil society associations influences their entry to and engagement with civil society in Romania.

Our research team conducted a total of **17 semi-structured interviews** with leaders of civil society organisations (7 women, 10 men). These representatives were from different national associations working on various issues such as human rights, gender, environmental issues, democracy, youth, and migration (including refugees). The fieldwork took place during the months of **October 2021 and Sep-**

**-tember 2022**, and involved multiple trips to different areas, including large cities like **Baia Mare and Bucharest**. Most interviewees were contacted through networking via email, phone calls, and personal contacts. Interviews with the participants were conducted individually, both in person and online.



Fig. 1. Themes of civil society associations

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Most of the interviewees moved abroad to pursue **higher education** and some stayed on working after completing their studies.

**Destination** countries varied amongst leaders of civil society associations, with most of them being located within **Europe and the United States**.

Many participants decided to permanently return to Romania due to their commitment to **political and ideological causes** and, sometimes, also to **explore job opportunities** in their country of origin. Some of them also expressed difficulties in adapting to the social context in their host country, which led them to decide to go back to Romania.

## (RE)SOCIALISATION ABROAD

The interviewees generally attribute their experience abroad to the development of new perspectives and the acquisition of knowledge. This process of resocialisation is usually facilitated by specific mechanisms, which can be narrowed down to three main ones.

Since many participants attended university abroad, **education** emerged as one of the main venues for their resocialisation. Notably, their studies in another country enhanced their exposure to new theoretical concepts and ideas. For example, one interviewee attributes his change of mentality to higher education and being surrounded by individuals who challenged his own political and civic ideologies. Another leader learned about environmental journalism while pursuing a master's degree, providing the basis for future work in this subject matter.

In some cases, the resocialisation process was facilitated by attending **political and civic events**, including workshops and conferences.

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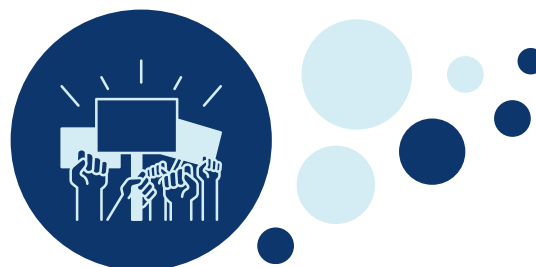
## ENTRY INTO CIVIL SOCIETY

Several interviewees recognise that their migration experience had a positive influence on their **decision to join or establish a civil society organisation** in Romania upon their return.

For example, one representative volunteered with an education and youth association abroad, which later inspired her to create her own association to address similar themes. Through this experience, she learned about youth engagement mechanisms in civil society and sought to replicate them in Romania.

One participant, for instance, was invited to an NGO conference in Finland, where she learned about local practices and gained valuable inspiration for a mentorship programme for young girls that she later launched in Romania. Another interviewee recalled the associative landscape in Paris, which exposed him to different repertoires of practices, various political ideas, and a much more fertile ground for activism than the one experienced in Romania.

Several interviewees also report **volunteering for non-governmental associations** abroad, which provided them with an opportunity to learn about how civil society operates in these contexts. For example, one representative supported civil society working with gender issues abroad, learning about advocacy and how to apply similar strategies in Romania.



Another participant founded an association with the Romanian diaspora while living abroad, aiming to promote information transparency and open access to data in the country of origin by proposing the same model applied elsewhere.

**Comparing Romania to other countries abroad** also influences interviewees' decision to engage with their national civil society. While living in the United States, one participant realised he wanted to return to Romania and create an NGO there.

Based on what he witnessed abroad, he wanted to directly engage in climate change advocacy in his home country and counter the Romanian media's reluctance to address this theme.

On the other hand, a few interviewees do not

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## MIGRATION EXPERIENCE AND WORK WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

According to the interviews, civil society leaders tend to leverage the experience acquired abroad when it comes to their agenda in their home country.

Many participants expressed their **desire to recreate useful practices witnessed abroad** upon return to Romania. For instance, one interviewee stated that her previous involvement in the civic and feminist environment in Spain influenced her approach to working with the Romanian national civil society later on. While living in Spain, she learned how to gain more visibility in the public discourse, mobilise other women's interest in a common cause, and engage in activism beyond research, all of which she replicated in her home country. Another participant capitalised on his academic experience in the United Kingdom and familiarity with Western research institutes to create one of the first think tanks in Romania.

Despite their strong commitment, some interviewees reportedly faced **significant obstacles** in fulfilling their projects. These challenges include **insufficient support from authorities and other associations**. One participant from a local association, for instance, acknowledged that their only source of support comes from youth associations and

attribute their decision to engage in civil society associations in Romania to what they observed during their time abroad. Instead, they mention **other experiences that occurred before or after migrating** as push factors.

that there is a lack of collaboration within the local community. Another participant highlighted issues related to an **unhealthy and hierarchical work culture** within some of the associations he has collaborated with.

**Scarcity of funding and heavy bureaucracy** are other frequent hurdles that hamper the work of civil society organisations. For example, a few participants claimed that civil society organisations are largely dependent on external financial support due to limited local funding opportunities and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures to access them.



Fig. 2. Photo taken by our research team in Bucharest, showing some protests against the war in Ukraine led by civil society organisations and private citizens.

## TRANSNATIONAL LINKS

Participants often mention their **transnational networks**, which sometimes they inherited from their time abroad and upon which they continue to rely for their civic engagement in Romania.

Participants did not report major adaptation issues in their host countries. Instead, many interviewees mention their **friends and colleagues** living abroad and recount their **engagement with international organisations and local associations** during their migration experience.

Many representatives also created an **academic network** while studying abroad, even if some of them did not use these contacts for professional purposes. Other participants established strong connections with the **Romanian diaspora** in the host country, which they leveraged to advocate for specific causes. One interviewee, for instance, used his relations with the Romanian diaspora to support one of the candidates for the local elections in Baia Mare.



However, participants also developed transnational links after the end of their migration experience. Several interviewees report a close connection with **foreign donors and institutional partners** able to support their projects. These international partnerships are crucial for securing funding, accessing specific spaces and opportunities, exchanging skills and knowledge, and establishing strong connections with individuals and associations abroad. For example, one participant mentions that well-established foreign associations working in the same sector he was interested in helped him establish his own organisation in Romania, sharing valuable insights and offering support during this initial phase.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to thank Mar Colomina, our former Research Assistant, for her invaluable support in assisting with the preparatory work for this brief.



MIGRADEMO is a European Research Council (ERC) funded project which examines the impact of migration on democratic participation and processes in countries of origin. It is hosted by the Department of Political Science at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Suggested citation: Pineda Sosa, F., Aricò, R.M. & Bortun, V. (2024) *Migration and Civil Society Leaders in Romania*. MIGRADEMO Fieldwork Briefs. Barcelona: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.