FIELDWORK BRIEF

MIGRATION AND THE POLITICAL ELITE IN ROMANIA

Authors: Roberta Maria Aricò and Vladimir Burton

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the MIGRADEMO project, this report displays selected descriptive findings from our research on how Members of Parliament link their international migration experience to their political outlook and work in their homeland parliaments. We examined 22 semi-structured interviews with returnees elected to the Romanian Parliament in the past two terms. Our preliminary analysis suggests that the time spent abroad generally influences these politicians' views and behaviours, shaping their political attitudes accordingly and offering valuable networks of foreign contacts. Some of these politicians also diffuse their new ideas and skills through their legislative proposals and other parliamentary activities, but also identify persistent hurdles to these activities.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on transnational migrant practices have uncovered how migrants influence democratic participation in their home countries 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 different levels, including the political elite, civil society, and among households in regions with high levels of outmigration. This brief focuses on **members of the Romanian Parliament who have returned from abroad**. Our research addresses a gap in the existing literature, which is mostly quantitative and focused on heads of state, by examining how the migration experience of these politicians influenced their perspectives and their activities both within and outside the Parliament.

Our research team conducted and analysed **22 semi-structured interviews** with returnee members of Parliament who were elected for the last two legislative terms (6 women, 16 men).

As the chart displays (Fig. 1), our analysis attempted to include both former and current members of Parliament affiliated with different national parties to provide a realistic image of the political environment in Romania. Out of 22 interviewees, 15 were members of Parliament in the previous legislative term (2016-2020) and 7 have been elected for the current one (2020-2024).

Our fieldwork took place between **June 2021 and September 2022**. We overcame challenges presented by the Covid-19 Pandemic, by incorporating online interviews alongside the in-person interviews during **three fieldwork visits in Bucharest** in October 2021, March 2022, and September 2022. We reached out to participants via mail and social media platforms.

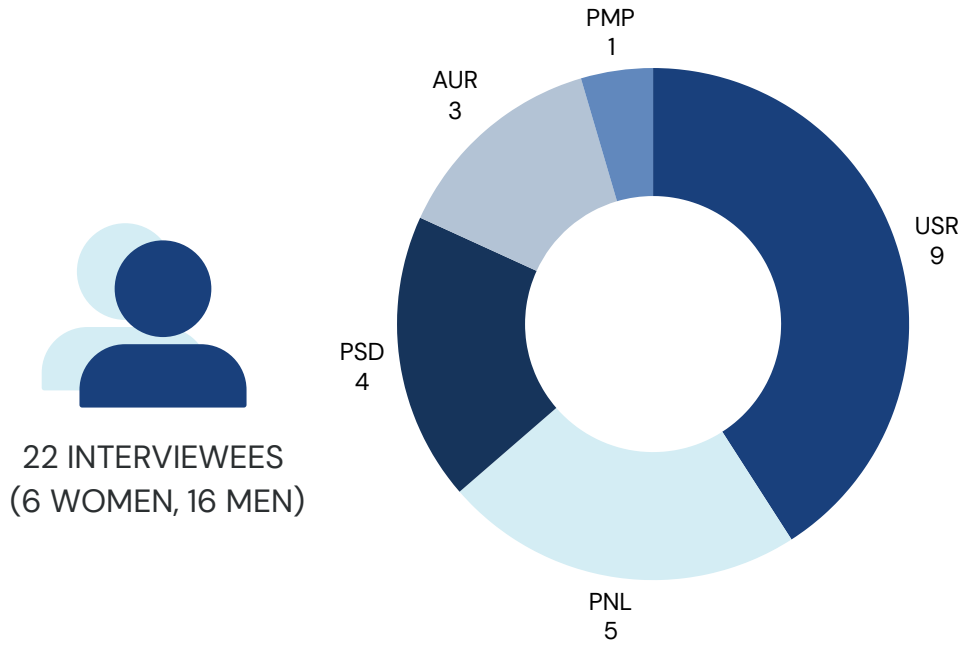


Fig. 1. Interviewees and party distribution. The acronyms stand for *Uniunea Salvați România* (USR), *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor* (AUR), *Partidul Social Democrat* (PSD), *Partidul Național Liberal* (PNL), and *Partidul Mișcarea Populară* (PMP).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

The vast majority of the interviewees left Romania primarily to **study or work abroad**. The reasons for moving were often contingent on the duration of the period of studying. Yet, most interviewees spent several years outside Romania, with just a few interviewees recounting a shorter experience abroad. Regarding their destinations, research participants mainly migrated to **Europe** (e.g., Spain, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, and France) and **North America** (e.g., Canada and the United States).

Participants generally highlight that the main reason for returning was a l**onging for their home country or family**.

However, a few interviewees also reported their **desire to change things in Romania** as a rationale behind their return. For instance, one participant claimed she studied abroad specifically to "understand how the Western world works", aiming then to return to Romania, join national politics, and put into practice what she learnt abroad.

(RE)SOCIALISATION ABROAD

While living abroad, participants recall experiencing a change in their attitudes and behaviours. This was usually facilitated by several mechanisms of resocialisation.

With a few exceptions, **political engagement** emerges as one of the main channels for resocialisation among interviewees. Some participants mention having voted for municipal and national elections in their host countries and appreciated the electoral systems and democratic practices witnessed abroad. Others actively joined foreign politics, with one participant running for elections in France and another one becoming the internal coordinator of an Italian party. A couple of interviewees also reportedly developed a strong sense of trust toward their political representatives abroad. For instance, one participant solicited his locally elected member of Parliament to uphold his working category from exploitation in the UK. Interviewees also benefitted from their **undirect exposure to the political environment in their host countries**, resha-

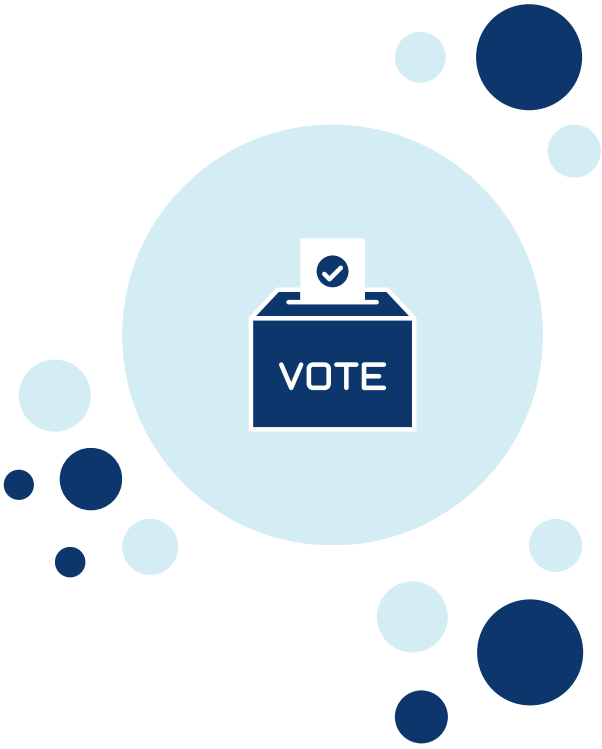
-ping their views accordingly. For instance, one participant was surprised to listen to a foreign politician publicly admitting his sexual orientation during a speech without facing criticism.

Education and **work** are other common drivers for resocialisation. When living abroad, many interviewees were immersed in a more multicultural and diverse environment than what they were used to in Romania.

While interviewees particularly valued their **interactions with other foreign people** living in their same host country, their social relationships with both the locals and other Romanians living abroad were limited and, thus, did not play a key role in their resocialisation process.

MIGRATION AND PERCEPTION OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND IMMIGRATION

Participants believe living abroad has influenced their perspectives on several political and social issues, including electoral systems and immigration.



Regarding **elections**, several interviewees noted that the population of their host countries tends to have a higher level of awareness of their political influence through the ballot box in Romania. This awareness is what contributes to a higher turnout. However, in terms of the electoral process itself, interviewees do not find many significant differences between their host countries and Romania. Instead, they highlight some common flaws (e.g., the corruptible influence of the media in the US or the lack of ID verification and the consequent potential for fraud in the UK). One interviewee criticised the Romanian electoral system and the disproportionately low number of parliamentary seats allocated to the diaspora, which has not been increased in response to the rising level of emigration.

Interviewees also experience a shift in their perception of **immigration**, showing a greater sympathy towards immigrants coming to Romania due to their personal migration background. For instance, one participant mentioned understanding what immigrants go through after his own painstaking experience in securing a permit to live and work abroad. This renewed openness towards immigration ranged from enhanced awareness to explicit support, with some interviewees highlighting the economic and cultural benefits that Romania could gain from immigration. However, a few participants raised concerns about the cultural differences between Romanians and those arriving from abroad, particularly from countries with a Muslim majority, fearing potential obstacles to their integration.

MIGRATION AND THE ENTRY INTO POLITICS

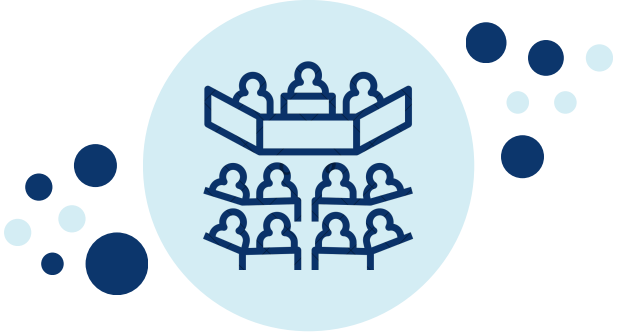
Interviewees often connect their migration experience with their **subsequent engagement in politics**. That said, the time spent abroad influenced this decision to a greater extent for some individuals than others.

The majority of participants decided to begin their political careers even **years after their return**. Only a few numbers of interviewees started their political involvement abroad and then went back to Romania strictly to join national politics. This level of commitment varied, ranging from setting up a diaspora organisation with the perspective of evolving into a proper party to running in elections for a local party in their host country.

Based on the interviews, the **desire to make a positive change** and, sometimes, replicate successful dynamics witnessed abroad is the main **push factor** behind the decision to enter politics. However, some participants could trace their decision to a particular temporal juncture. Indeed, several interviewees cited the 2015 tragedy from the *Colectiv* nightclub in Bucharest, which took the lives of 64 people attending a music gig, as the catalyst that pushed them to fight for change by entering politics.

Although the interviewees' choice of party came as a **mix of ideological affinities and opportunity**, their migration background played a significant role in this selection process and electoral campaign. Some participants report that it enhanced their image and perception and often served as an indicator of their credibility as candidates, highlighting their status as 'fresh faces' entering the political arena and the skills attained in the West. According to the participants, **diaspora members are greatly valued** because – as an interviewee said – they can leverage "examples of good practice from functional societies where they have worked and performed".

Some new parties (e.g., USR and AUR) actively court some participants, showing their **disposition to recruit diaspora members** but also trying to compensate for their shortage of candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections. However, other parties show **a less favourable approach towards return migrants**, posing challenges to their inclusion within local political structures and national politics in general. For example, one interviewee mentioned that despite being approached by the party to stand in elections for the diaspora constituency, he was not given an eligible seat. This was because the party favoured another member, who had no migration experience but had stronger connections within the party leadership. This incident is not unique as another participant from a different party described how the leadership based in Romania tried to marginalise the diaspora branches and representatives out of fear of their growing influence within the party.



LINKING MIGRATION EXPERIENCE WITH PARLIAMENTARY ACTIVITY

The interviewees recognise how their migration experiences influenced their later **parliamentary work**, often becoming a platform for sharing and reshaping what they had observed abroad.

Initiating and supporting legislative proposals stand as one of the main channels of democratic diffusion among participants. Notably, some interviewees leveraged their experience abroad to inspire the drafting process of new laws and introduce valuable practices in their home country.

Participants also rely on their **transnational networks** – created either during or due to experience abroad – which proved to be another key mechanism of democratic diffusion. Sometimes, these links entail relations with like-minded acquaintances in their old destination country who could provide them insightful input for their political initiatives, such as former teachers or colleagues at the university. In other cases, the transnational connections are used for more symbolic purposes, such as facilitating the twinning between a town in Romania and one in their previous host country.

Despite these attempts, participants identify **several obstacles and challenges** to their diffusion process. **Partisan logic** and **a weak political culture** are among the most cited obstacles.

Fig. 2. Photo taken by our research team in Bucharest, showing the entrance to the Romanian Parliament.

In particular, several interviewees report hesitancy in being more vocal on certain topics, such as immigration or LGBTQ+ rights, since their parties considered these topics controversial for the electorate.

Based on the interviews, other obstacles to diffusion include the **heavy bureaucracy** and **slow communication** among public institutions, **intra-party divisions**, **corruption**, **lack of adequate legal framework**, as well as the **time they spend away from the country**, which can sometimes be instrumentalised by others to portray them as out of touch with Romanian realities.

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