

The VUCA World of Arab and Moldovan Migrants in Romania

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Abstract. *This paper sets out to investigate the impact of the VUCA world (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) on the vulnerability and resilience of incoming migrants in Romania, as well as on their integration patterns. Vulnerability and resilience are conceptualized through the four elements of the VUCA world. Data was collected through 35 semi-structured, psycho-social interviews, and 4 focus groups carried out between January 2020 and November 2021 with young migrants (aged 18 to 29). Participants came from two ethnic backgrounds: young migrants of Arab and Moldovan origins. Results show that much of VUCA is generated by the lack of employment opportunities and by the bureaucratic public administration. At the same time, the challenges raised by the VUCA world for migrants can be reduced through the improvement of destination language skills and through the development of social networks.*

Keywords: international migration, integration, VUCA, resilience, public administration

Introduction

In 2020, 3.6 per cent of the world's population was constituted by migrants; the total international migrant population was of approximately 281 million (United Nations, 2020). Whether this means much or not, one thing is certain: as the volume of international migration increases (2.3 per cent in 1980, United Nations, n.d.), so does the VUCA character of the globalized world in which we live. Such developments are only expected to continue. The most recent examples, of the war in Ukraine and of the COVID-19 pandemic, are but two of the many signs that the world will become even more ambivalent, with even more people on the move.

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As Drath (2016) observes, there is much need of meaning and identity in a VUCA world. There is even more such need for migrants, who have to adapt to the new cultures that they try to settle in. Resilience can serve as a tool to find meaning and identity in a VUCA world: a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

Resilience is a socio-psychological capacity that can help migrants better deal with surrounding global events such as pandemics, climate change, geopolitical complications etc., which pose challenges on societies and communities, affecting migration flows by either determining populations to migrate or, in other instances, by restraining them from doing so. At the moment though, global migration happens in a context of VUCA.

Gamso and Yuldashev (2021) demonstrate that volatility in foreign aid leads to an increase of international migration. More than that, though, a higher impact upon international migration is due to the economic and political volatility in the sending country (Agadjanian & Gorina, 2019). Economic or political volatility, either in the sending or receiving society, creates fragile positions for international migrants: it can determine them to leave their home society or, respectively, create integration challenges in the host society (Zotova & Cohen, 2019). The slowdown of national economies due to volatility reduces labor and consumption opportunities for individuals and weakens their positions in society, arguably determining some of them to leave in search of a better, secure future. At the same time, volatility is associated with an uncertain time ahead. Migration is then considered and pursued as a possibility to reduce such uncertainty.

However, apart from the socio-economic uncertainty in the home society, there is yet another, more impactful dimension of uncertainty in international migration. Migrants leave their native societies for a new and, at the moment of migration, possibly unknown and unpredictable society. Lübke et al. (2021) have studied the uncertainty of migration and have shown that uncertainty (of future, in general, of life outcomes etc.) is expected to decrease as the access of migrants to resources of any kind (economic, social, relational etc.) increases (which, at the same time, increases resilience).

In what concerns the complexity of international migration, there seems to be a general acceptance that complexity grows along technological, informational, communicational or transportation/mobility developments. The flows and backgrounds of migration become more and more diversified as society develops. All in all, more globalization and more neoliberalism lead to more migration (Cortina & Reza, 2013).

From a macro perspective, international migration is also VUCA because its dimensions, forms and flows cannot be anticipated. Recent events such as the Syrian Civil War, the Boko Haram insurgency, the Kosovo War or the War in Ukraine, to name just a few, can suddenly determine people to migrate *en masse* and can also make it complicated to determine international migration in absolute numbers.

Kaundert and Masys (2018) consider that linear thinking is inappropriate when trying to grasp international migration. There is so much VUCA in international migration that a systematic, step by step thought process cannot provide a clear and sufficient understanding of international migration.

Literature review

In a relatively recent work on leadership, Kok and Van den Heuvel (2018) point out that migration, multiculturalism and globalization – all of them, actually, intertwined – have had the effect of a tornado sweeping over the usual way of doing business. „Usual”, here, as it stands to reason, is a reference to a (rather fictional?) world that would have existed prior to the existence of the effects

of these three factors combined (at the same time, a “pre”-VUCA world). Kok and Van den Heuvel go on to suggest that migration plus the other factors have changed the fabric of economics, of politics and, implicitly, of doing business, up to the point where the current world can be seen as totally different to the one that was known no more than three or four decades ago. In such a new, VUCA world, the authors believe, business leaders and not only they have to adapt their leadership styles in order to address the many challenges posed by the effects of migration, including extreme competitiveness for labor. More spirituality is encouraged by Kok and Van den Heuvel in such a world.

The idea of the VUCA world was introduced by Bennis and Nanus (1985) in, again, a writing on leadership, which hinted towards the implications of VUCA on the work of leaders. It took some time and probably a couple of dotcom and financial crises (early and late 2000s) until VUCA received widespread attention in the public opinion as well and transcended from a concept to a reality that nowadays shapes our world. This emergence of the VUCA reality coincided with the existence of Gen Z and Gen Y. International migration as part of these generational changes also underlies the impact of digitalization (Wilkomm, 2021) and associated trends such as climate change and mobility, thus increasing in complexity.

For Marschall and Crawford (2021), the VUCA phenomenon has also led to increasingly diverse societies. The authors believe that two of the most important constituting factors of the VUCA world are migration and cultural diffusion. By looking closer at this idea, a logical sequence would be that overseas migration implies a transfer of culture and knowledge from one country to another; the receiving country, thus, enriches its culture by welcoming the ideas, customs, and social behaviors brought along by the migrants, wherefrom increased VUCA result. Not only are there cultural diversifications, but the migrant population also makes up an important proportion of existing populations in given societies (Eckardt, 2007; Keygnaert et al., 2014). Living together with (other) migrants in global societies is both recognized and expected to lead to more manifestations of VUCA (Kerényi and McIntosh, 2019).

Methodology

This paper is part of a pan-European project regarding the integration of young vulnerable migrants from third countries: *EMpowerment through liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in vulnerable conditions* (MIMY), funded by the European Union (Grant agreement ID: 870700, <https://doi.org/10.3030/870700>). The project involved 13 universities or stakeholders across Europe. Both the focus group and interview tools for the research were developed by the Italian team Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) and then employed by the other partner universities, each of them collecting data for their respective country of origin. Hence, 35 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus groups were carried out by our team in order to collect information about the vulnerabilities and resilience mechanisms of young incoming migrants in Romania (aged 18 to 29). Two ethnic subgroups were targeted in particular, as these represent the largest shares of incoming migrants in Romania: migrants of Arab (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan) and Moldovan origins. Due to the overlap of the data collection calendar with the Covid-19 pandemic, most interviews were carried out online, per Zoom (save for some few face-to-face or telephone interviews). The data collection period spanned over nearly two years (January 2020 – November 2021).

Both interview tools included open-ended questions. These were meant to identify vulnerable experiences of participants, as well as resilience mechanisms they developed to cope with such experiences. The discussions were mainly carried out on micro-social and mezzo-social

levels, concerning topics such as family support, family relationships, family expectations, as well as educational inclusion, labor inclusion, societal inclusion, housing inclusion etc.

Peer researchers were used to support the data collection process, especially there where the participants did not have a proper mastery of Romanian, English or French (the languages in which most discussions were held). Apart from translations, peer researchers were also credited with active roles in the interviews, being allowed to step in and ask questions whenever they had the impression that clarifications were needed. Informed consent statements were signed with all participants before engaging in discussions.

Two focus groups were carried out with each ethnic subgroup, as well as 15 interviews with Moldovans (7m, 8f) and 20 with Arab migrants (9m, 11f). The focus groups with Moldovans were mixed, while the ones with Arab migrants were separated by gender. The focus groups and the interviews were recorded and then transcribed by the research team.

To protect the real identities of the participants, their names were replaced through a coding system [MY1_RO_Bucharest_m], where “MY1” shows the chronological sequence of the young migrant interviewed, “Bucharest” / “Iasi” shows the migrant’s city of residence in Romania, and “m” / “f” the gender of the participant.

Given that the purpose of the MIMY research project was to investigate the vulnerability of young migrants, and also that, to this end, vulnerability was conceptualized as a pluri-faceted construct, we consider that the collected data are inherently related to the VUCA concept. The purpose of this paper is to analyze what challenges the VUCA world raises for migrants in the destination country and how these challenges might be overcome. Thereupon, we further want to look at which part of VUCA (vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) poses most problems for migrants. We postulate that the VUCA of young migrants in Romania is strongly affected by their individual attributes and by the migration circumstances (education, family, social connections etc.). Additionally, this paper wants to discuss and suggest coping strategies through which the challenges raised by the VUCA world for migrants can be reduced. Hence, the research question asks what are the challenges raised by the VUCA world for young migrants in Romania and through what kind of resilience mechanisms can these be tackled?

Results

The statements of the migrants interviewed reflect that their move to Romania coincided with a move into a VUCA world. The VUCA experience would have most probably been felt in any other country as well. In the following section, though, we are going to focus on why and how the migration to Romania was perceived by the interviewed youngsters as a VUCA experience. In most of the cases, the VUCA experience was determined by labor conditions, by socialization contexts and by interaction with the local public administration.

Volatility

Having access to proper employment opportunities was perceived by the migrants as a key condition for reducing volatility. As migrants are often liable to rapid and unpredictable changes, socio-normatively inferred by practices beyond their knowledge and control, access to (well paid) jobs and the associated financial earnings can reduce volatility. As one migrant points out:

“And when you are financially okay. I wouldn't say financial freedom, because it's not easy to have a financial freedom, but it's possible to have a good financial situation or status.”
(MY20_RO_Bucharest_m)

Being “*financially okay*”, having “*a good financial status*” is, thus, understood as a stabilizing factor that reduces volatility. The risk of an economy likely to worsen suddenly and unexpectedly can be reduced if migrants have a financially secure position.

Uncertainty

Because the interviews and focus groups for this research project were carried out between January 2020 and November 2021, thus coinciding with the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is not surprising that the pandemic was associated with uncertainty:

“Vulnerability means uncertainty, loneliness, lack of confidence, anxiety. A vulnerable person has a lot of fears, no confidence, is very stressed out by new things.” (MY2_RO_Iasi_f)

On top of that, migrants also acknowledged that political contexts and diplomatic challenges lead to increased uncertainty:

“With this virus, maybe some other virus will appear. The political context with Russia, Ukraine, with Israel, Gaza. Things are happening in the world that give you a sort of uncertainty.” (MY3_RO_Iasi_m)

Last but not least, apart from the Covid-19 pandemic and the geopolitical situations, uncertainty was also perceived on a more personal level, understood to be triggered by the fear of “*losing someone dear*.” (NM7_RO_Iasi_F)

Complexity

If we split VUCA into parts, then we can observe that most statements made by the migrants refer to the “C” (complexity). As resulted from the interviews and the focus groups, complexity was mainly caused by two factors: labor, respectively access to the labor market, and mastering of the language:

“I cannot have access to a better job because I don’t have citizenship and the companies don’t want to get involved with the documents/papers for Immigration [Office, n.a.], because the process is rather complex, time consuming. [...] For the moment I don’t have that many opportunities to change the job, because I don’t have the citizenship. For now, I stay here [at the current work place, n.a.], maybe I learn something new. Maybe until I obtain the response regarding the citizenship I will advance at the current work place, to put that in the CV.” (MY8_RO_Iasi_f)

“I had a lot of problems there [in the store where she was employed, n.a.]. It changed me a lot, I saw bad people there. Also good people, but more bad people [referring to the other employees indirectly accusing her of stealing, n.a.]. [I was accused] because I was new, I was refugee, I am Afghan. Also, the clients who came, some said: this girl doesn’t know how to speak, doesn’t know the language. (...) One woman said to me: If you come here to our country, you should learn the language. (...) You always try to stay strong but you reach a moment when you can no longer do it, you remember everything, everyone that said a bad thing. And I burst into tears” (MY9_RO_Bucharest_f).

“One of the disadvantages... I don’t speak Romanian. And it’s important. And the other thing is that the average wages are too low, comparing them to the standard of living.” (MY20_RO_Bucharest_m)

“I told you, the language is a problem. I think if I would have learned [the language, n.a.]. If I had the language, I would have been integrated better.” (MY20_RO_Bucharest_m)

Learning and knowing the language of the host country is seen by the migrants as an opportunity to reduce complexity. Language skills are associated with more options to communicate with the local population (MY9_RO_Bucharest_f) and, implicitly, with better job prospects (MY9_RO_Bucharest_f) and with more integration opportunities (MY20_RO_Bucharest_m). At the same time, knowing the language is a mandatory requirement for obtaining citizenship. Once citizenship is obtained, more job opportunities are expected to arise (MY8_RO_Iasi_f). Also, citizenship would reduce the VUCA for migrants.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity was particularly addressed with respect to the relation between migrants and the local public authorities:

“There is always a problem for foreigners with the administration. With the documents, a lot of documents. Also, the behavior of people from the administration. They don’t ease the process. They say: do like this, then no, do it a different way, come back. We are not available right now, you have to come at a different time.” (MY5_RO_Bucharest_f)

Public administration officers are blamed for not easing the process but of doing exactly the opposite, namely of increasing ambiguity, which, ultimately, leads to migrants becoming even more vulnerable, as the second part of the aforementioned statement shows. The fact that municipalities cannot properly respond to the complex issues of migration makes it difficult for migrants.

Discussions

In this paper, we investigated how the VUCA experience shaped the experiences of young Arab and Moldovan migrants living in Romania. The fact that migrants had more to declare about complexity (“C”) than about the other components of the VUCA world should not be surprising, as migration in itself is a complex social process. Also, what stands out is that the references to acquiring destination-language skills have been made in connection to complexity. Thereupon, we can claim that one of the main factors through which the complexity of migration can be reduced is through learning the language of the host society as quickly as possible. Rapid acquisition of language skills is also a desideratum in the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027) with respect to the aim of rapid inclusion and integration of migrants. This being the case, Moldovan migrants have the chances for a faster integration, since they speak the same language as the one in the destination country (even if with some small differences related to accent or regionalisms), while young Arabs have to learn Romanian from scratch. Knowing the language is seen as an opportunity for both labor market inclusion and social inclusion.

Ambiguity was addressed when it came to the relationship with the public authorities. Participants mentioned that the – what they believed to be – unreasonable bureaucracy at the immigration offices, widened by the not clear enough information about the needed paperwork, raises ambiguity, makes them feel unwelcome and unreasonably delays the integration process.

The reduction of volatility is strongly connected to the reduction of complexity, as the main factor for lowering volatility was believed to be financial stability. Restricted access to the labor market (due to lack of language skills or any other reasons) reduces the possibilities of being “*financially okay*”, as one participant mentioned, and, thus, increases volatility. For a proper integration, such volatility should be reduced through better labor market access opportunities.

With regards to uncertainty, the main concerns addressed were the Covid-19 pandemic and the geopolitical wars going on in the world. These mentions indicate that uncertainty is strongly related to the present in which the migrants live, and the associated difficulties in seeing how global situations might unfold. Also, it is interesting to observe that uncertainty was triggered by some global events (COVID-19 pandemic, or wars), and not by events unfolding in the host country. Nevertheless, the uncertainty caused by such global events was psychologically transferred onto the Romanian society in which the migrants live.

Conclusion

The results of this research show that international migration can be associated with a move into a VUCA world. Thereupon, the findings of this paper are in line with the opinion of Marschall and Crawford (2021), according to which VUCA has led to increasingly diverse societies. In our case, societal diversity was influenced by multiculturalism and transnationalism: third country nationals moving to Romania, trying to adapt to this new society for them, but while also maintaining contact with their native societies and traditions. Also, Eckardt (2007) and Keygnaert et al. (2014) considered that the emergence of the VUCA world is a result of the increasing proportion of migrant populations in given societies. Having in mind that, according to recent data of the International Organization for Migration, there were approximately 700,000 migrants living in Romania in 2020 (UN DESA, 2020), it should not wonder that the Romanian society becomes more and more of a VUCA world, with implications such as those reported by the participants to this study.

Results of this paper also confirm previous findings that the integration of migrants is a complex and time-consuming process (Cimpoeru et al., 2023). The combined effects of globalization and deep sociological transformations lead to a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity for migrants. Based on the statements from the interviews, we can conclude that a better access onto the labor market and the improvement of language skills can reduce such complexity, loss of time and ambiguity. In what concerns the language, Moldovan migrants seem to have the benefit of dealing with a lower complexity thanks to shared language, while Arab migrants have to overcome such barriers first. Most of the ambiguity issues presented by the interviewees came from the interaction with public authorities. Thereupon, the latter ones should attempt to improve their service delivery so as to reduce ambiguity for migrants.

One of the main limitations of this paper is determined by the methodology employed: although it used in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups, which provided valuable insights into the perceptions and opinions of migrants in Romania, the paper lacks a quantitative background. Statistical insights would have been useful for obtaining a clearer picture of the VUCA world that migrants in Romania are facing, yet these were left out to focus on the qualitative methodological aspects. Future research might use such mixed methods to provide better details. Another limitation of this paper is its rather general, descriptive aspect. The paper was set out to inspect how the components of the VUCA world are reflected upon migrants arriving in Romania. Future research should take the analysis to a deeper level and discuss the implications of VUCA

on particular aspects of migrants' lives, ie. education, medication, labor market access, social relationships, use of language etc.

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