

The Great Romanian Exodus to Western Europe: Statistics, Trends, and Insights on the Causes of Migration

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Abstract. *Over the past century, Romania has undergone a remarkable transformation from a predominantly sedentary society to one of the most dynamic sources of workforce in the world. This paper analyzes the underlying causes of this transition and argues that, in addition to economic factors, cultural aspects and historical developments have played a role in shaping migration behavior. To understand this patterns, we have compared the low mobility of Romanians in the interwar period, the impact of severe restrictions during the communist regime, and the massive migration after 2000. Although the recent Romanian exodus to the West was initially driven by economic considerations and frustrations related to historical legacies, social determinants gradually became more important in influencing migration. This finding is relevant since living standards have risen significantly over the past two decades, yet emigration remains a large-scale process, and the Romanian diaspora has continued to be substantial. While academic literature predominantly frames migration through the lens of economic determinism and push-pull dynamics, our study adopts a broader, interdisciplinary perspective, integrating insights from economics, history, and anthropology. Methodologically, we strive for a balance between qualitative analysis and a rigorous evaluation of statistical data from the most reputable institutions. By applying this approach within a long-term historical framework, we examined a century of Romanian emigration, aiming to uncover structural shifts in migration patterns and mitigate the limitations of cross-sectional interpretations.*

Keywords: Romanian emigration, European labor mobility, cultural determinants of migration, communist-era migration restrictions, interwar migration behavior, Romanian diaspora dynamics.

Introduction

Migration has been a much-debated topic over the past decade, serving as a popular talking point for locals worried about immigrants taking their jobs, immigrants worried about the possibility of deportation, social media influencers seeking short-lived notoriety, political leaders eager to capitalize on public anxieties for electoral gain, and bureaucrats tasked with justifying the public programs and policies they implement. Yet migration is a natural phenomenon, perhaps humanity's oldest survival mechanism. To understand it, we must identify its causes and explain its effects. In this article, we focus on the factors that determine migration, its causes, and analyze the situation of Romanian emigrants and the Romanian diaspora.

Over the past century, Romanians have shifted from a largely sedentary nation with modest emigration rates to one of the most dynamic populations in the world. This significant change has been driven by a complex mix of economic and cultural factors, as well as major historical and political events, including the Great Depression in the interwar period, the rise and fall of the communist regime in the second half of the 20th century, the opening of borders in several Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries in the 2000s, Romania's

accession to the European Union in 2007, the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, and the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022.

Understanding this phenomenon is becoming increasingly crucial, as a new migration shock seems forthcoming soon, echoing the European migrant crisis of 2015. This situation could be exacerbated by the rise of populist parties and governments in the Western world, which advocate for isolationist policies and strategically leverage the concept of national sovereignty for political gain.

To support our analysis of a century of Romanian emigration, we have drawn on the most reliable statistical data and the latest qualitative research on the subject.

Literature review

This paper aims to explain how the Romanian nation has transformed over the course of a century from a predominantly sedentary society to one characterized by large and dynamic migratory flows. We hypothesize that, beyond economic factors, deep historical causes have played a crucial role in shaping the massive wave of emigration following the fall of communism. Furthermore, we test the idea that in recent years the dominance of economic and historical drivers of the Romanian exodus has been partially replaced by socio-cultural factors. These premises form the foundation of our comparative analysis.

The statistical yearbooks from that era, issued by the Central Institute of Statistics (Institutul Central de Statistică 1932; 1936; 1940), hold significant relevance for understanding Romanian migration during the inter-war period, a topic that remains largely underexplored in academic discourse.

A crucial starting point for understanding the deeper roots of the Romanian exodus lies in the historical, political, and cultural dimensions of migration. In this context, Cazaban and Bădiliță (2023) analyze the impact of communism on the mentality, values, and identity of the Romanian diaspora. Anghel et al. (2016) explore the transactions made by communist officials in exchange for granting emigration privileges to national minorities. Meanwhile, Cohen (2010), and Beer, Radu, and Kührer-Wielach (2020) provide valuable insights into the migration of Germans from Romania following World War II.

Closer to the present day, Mîndrican and Matei (2023) discuss migration in the first years after the fall of communism; Sandu (2022), although embarking on statist premises, puts forward some interesting interpretations of the nowadays causes of Romanian emigration. Gonzalez-Enriquez and Rinken (2021) explore the influence of populist parties on Spaniards' perceptions of immigrants, while Rodriguez (2022) provides a nuanced cultural and political – rather than economic – explanation for the social integration of Romanian immigrants into Spanish society.

One of the most comprehensive assessments of recent Romanian emigration is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019) migration review, which draws on extensive statistical resources to analyze the causes and effects of the phenomenon – although it arguably overemphasizes the consequences of high-skilled emigration. In addition, we acknowledge the contributions of several international migration reports that place Romanian emigration in a broader global context, including those by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024), the International Organization for Migration (2024), and the World Bank (2018).

Finally, we have relied on the most up-to-date and reliable migration statistics, sourced from the World Bank. (n.d.) and the official statistical offices of Romania (Institutul Național de

Statistică, n.d.-a; n.d.-b), Spain (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, n.d.), and the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

The literature review shows that while there are commendable qualitative studies of Romanian migration – such as those by Cazaban and Bădiliță (2023), comprehensive syntheses like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019) Romanian migration review, and insightful specific study cases that include the work of Rodriguez (2022) – these analyses predominantly take a cross-sectoral approach. As a result, there remains a significant opportunity for a long-term examination of this phenomenon that could deepen our understanding and stimulate further academic inquiry.

Methodology

This study qualifies as explanatory research (see Bhattacharjee, 2012), as it aims to investigate fundamental dilemmas, specifically how and why the Romanian nation successfully transitioned from a predominantly sedentary model – deeply rooted in the interwar ideal of ancestral land and reinforced by the rigid industrial structures of the communist era – to one of the most adaptable and globally oriented labor forces in the modern market.

We adopted a deductive approach by exploring the deep causes of Romanian emigration through an inquiry of key qualitative studies (see Cazaban & Bădiliță, 2023) and well-documented case studies (see Rodriguez, 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). In parallel, we conducted a structured review of statistical data from the most reliable sources, including the World Bank and national statistical offices.

In contrast to existing studies that offer cross-sectional overviews, our study emphasizes a long-term perspective, engaging in a comparative analysis that traces the evolution of Romanians' migratory behavior over the past century.

Results and discussions. A hundred years of Romanian emigration

Romanian emigration to the West has been shaped by a variety of economic and cultural influences, including historical, social, and political causes. In this section, we will undertake a century-long retrospective of Romanian emigration, seeking to understand the underlying causes of this phenomenon.

The interwar period: social and economic barriers to migration

During the interwar period, Romanian emigration rates were very low, with limited opportunities available to a predominantly rural population, where four out of five people lived in the countryside (Institutul Central de Statistică, 1940, p. 44). Furthermore, this epoch was characterized by a significant lack of education, as evidenced by the fact that in 1930 only slightly more than half (57%) of the population aged seven and over could read and write, resulting in an illiteracy rate of 43% (Institutul Central de Statistică, 1940, p. 92).

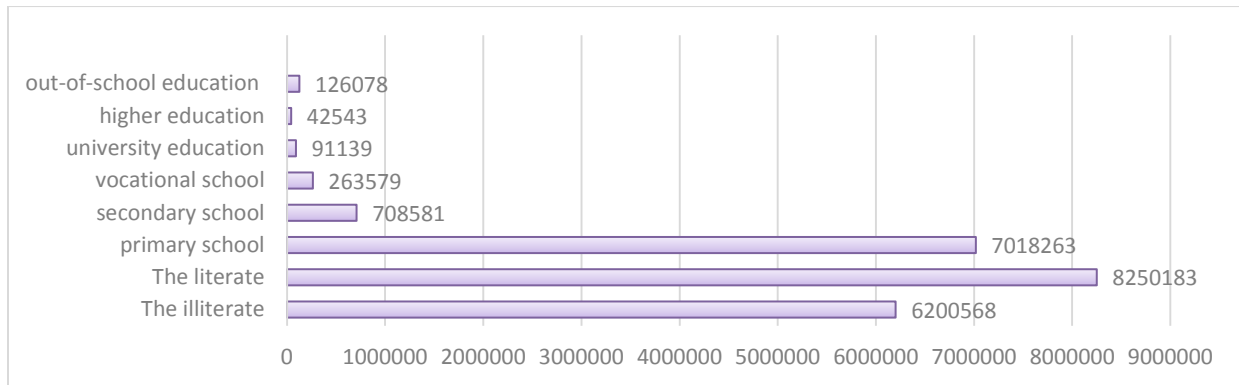


Figure 1. Educational attainment of Romanian citizens aged 7 and above in 1930

Source: Institutul Central de Statistică, 1940, p. 92.

Among those who are literate, a significant majority, 84%, have received only basic education in reading and mathematics at the elementary school level, while only 1.6% have completed higher education (Institutul Central de Statistică, 1940, p. 92).

The Romanian population faced considerable challenges in acquiring the necessary skills to make a meaningful contribution to foreign societies, since a substantial majority, about 72.3%, were engaged in subsistence agriculture (Institutul Central de Statistică, 1940, p. 404). As a result, between 1926 and 1938, only 80.000 people sought opportunities through emigration (Institutul Central de Statistică, 1940, p. 192).

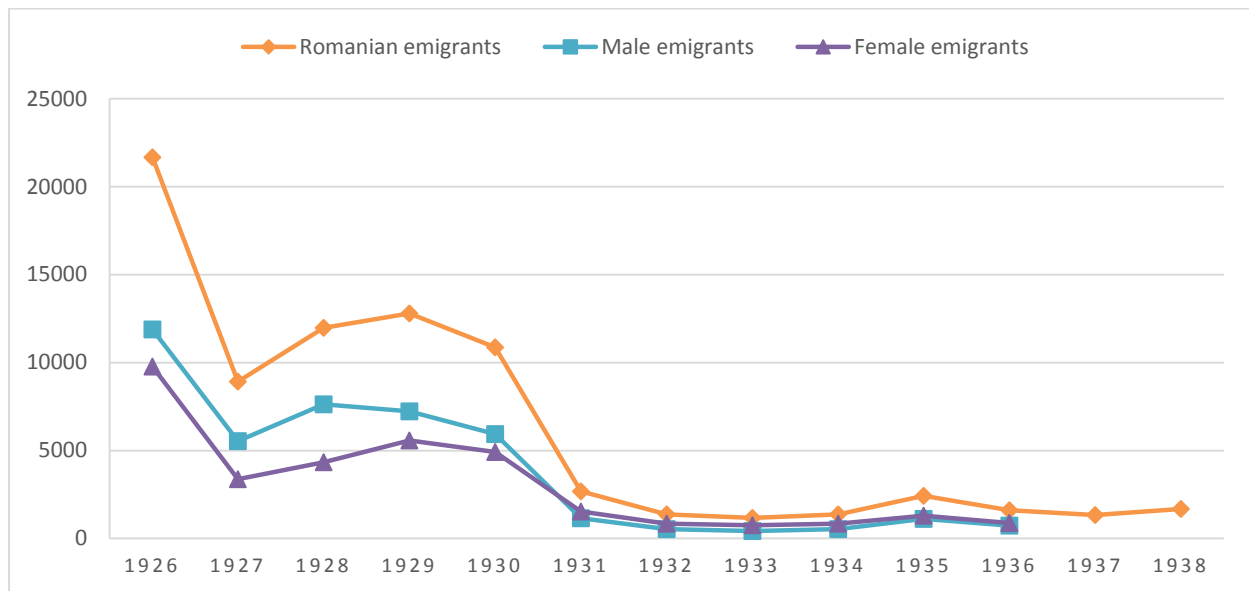


Figure 2. Romanian emigrants between 1926 and 1938

Source: Institutul Central de Statistică, 1940, p. 192.

Emigration, though more noticeable in the 1920s, remained relatively limited in absolute numbers. The onset of the Great Depression led to a sharp decline, followed by a modest increase in 1935 and subsequent stabilization in the following years.

In fact, the ethnic Romanian population represented a small segment of Romania's emigrant community, as evidenced by the 1930 statistics (Institutul Central de Statistică, 1932, pp. 242-243),

which indicate that national minorities, specifically Germans, Jews, Hungarians, Russians, and Yugoslavs, constituted the majority of those who left the country. Notably, the preferred destinations for Romanian citizens in 1930 included the United States, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Peru (Institutul Central de Statistică, 1932, pp. 242-243), reflecting their aspirations for a new beginning in the vast and prosperous lands of the Americas – a region of boundless opportunities but also significant risks.

Between 1926 and 1936, men constituted most emigrants, accounting for 56% of the total.

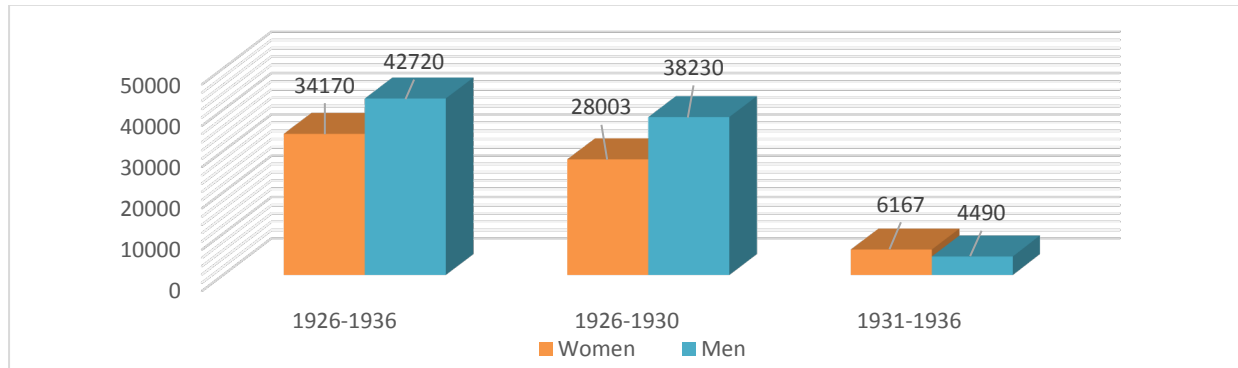


Figure 3. Gender distribution of the Romanian emigrants between 1926 and 1936

Source: Institutul Central de Statistică, 1940, p. 192.

It is particularly noteworthy that before the Great Depression, most Romanian emigrants were men, but from 1931 onwards, this trend underwent a remarkable reversal. This shift may indicate that women were more willing to accept the challenges of traveling, working, and living in foreign societies under difficult circumstances.

The communist era: political restrictions on migration

The communist regime viewed the expatriation of Romanian citizens as an act of national betrayal and imposed regulations on emigration that were highly restrictive. Visas were rarely issued and were typically reserved for trusted members of the communist elite, dissidents whom the state wished to expel, and as will be discussed below, national minorities. In practice, the chance for many Romanians to escape from the socialist camp was to take the life-threatening risk of crossing the Danube clandestinely, with four possible outcomes: drowning, being shot by border guards, being captured and imprisoned, or successfully reaching Yugoslavia and then making their way to the West. Notably, while there are some documented cases of Romanians bravely swimming across the river, Steiner & Magheți (as referenced in Anghel et al., 2016, p. 6) estimate that there were only 16,000 attempts to cross into Yugoslavia during the last decade of the communist regime.

The oppressive Romanian authorities did not hesitate to trade the lives of national minorities, Jews and Saxons (the German minority), allowing them to emigrate in exchange for financial agreements with the states of Israel and West Germany. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019, p. 39), approximately 240,000 Jewish Romanians left Romania between 1948 and 1989, highlighting a significant historical migration shaped by complex socio-political dynamics.

In 1930, the population of ethnic Germans in Romania was reported to be 740,000 (Institutul Central de Statistică, 1936, p. 39), while by around 2020 this number had fallen to just 24,000, with 500,000 living in Germany (Beer, Radu, & Kührer-Wielach, 2020, p. 15). The

significant decline in the ethnic German population can be attributed to several waves of migration: during and after World War II, during the communist era, and in the early years after the anti-communist revolution of 1989 (World Bank, 2018, p. 5). In some cases, the forced migration of the Romanian German minority was politically enforced in the aftermath of World War II (see Cohen, 2010). According to some sources, 180.000 ethnic Germans emigrated to the Federal Republic of Germany between 1977 and 1989, with the Romanian state receiving financial compensation for each travel visa issued (Anghel et al., 2016, p. 3). The Federal Republic of Germany paid a sum of 5000 marks for each person from Romania who was allowed to emigrate, and it is noted that the fee charged by the Romanian authorities more than doubled towards the end of the communist regime (Anghel et al., 2016, p. 5).

The Hungarian ethnic group was also tacitly encouraged to leave Romania, as its large presence in the historic region of Transylvania was seen as a potential threat to the sovereignty and national unity envisioned by the communists. As a result, approximately 55.000 people migrated to neighboring Hungary in the 1980s (Anghel et al., 2016, p. 3).

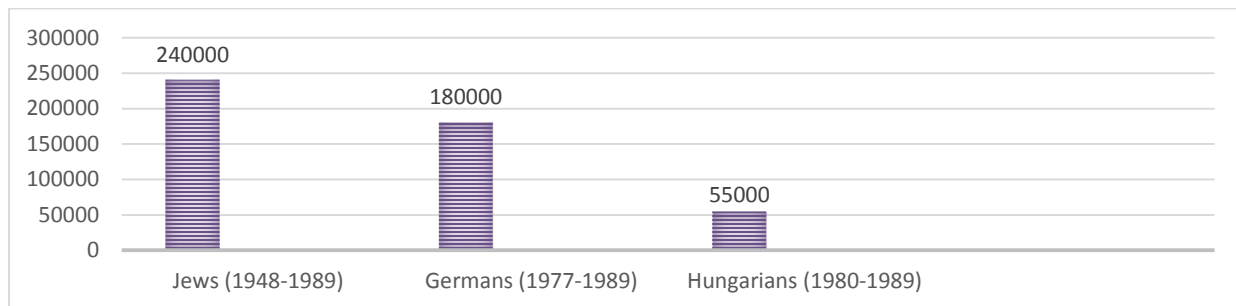


Figure 4. The exodus of minorities during the communist era

Source: Anghel et al., 2016, p. 3; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 39.

Despite the stringent control imposed on the exits of Romanians from the country, employing highly effective institutional mechanisms of coercion such as the Border Guard Troops, the State Security (Securitate), and the Directorate of Foreign Intelligence, the communist authorities perceived the emigration of minorities as a means of reinforcing national sovereignty and promoting the *Romanianization* of Romania (see Boia, 2015). Since the 1970s, the country has followed a path characterized by radical patriotism and the instrumentalization of history, a phenomenon referred to as national-communism or national-Ceausism.

Since statistical data often overlooks the complex nuances of migration, it is essential to explore its cultural causes through deeper qualitative analysis. A compelling illustration of this claim can be found in a comparison between the Romanian exiles of the 1940s, who fled the rise of various forms of totalitarianism in Romania, and the Romanians who sought to escape communist Romania in the 1970s and 1980s. While both groups left the country in search of refuge in the West, the motivations behind their departures were markedly different; the former left out of a sense of love for their homeland, while the latter were driven by a deep-seated animosity toward the regime. The theologian Cristian Bădiliță (2023, pp. 9-10) articulates this distinction eloquently, drawing inspiration from the works of Mircea Eliade: „An expatriate from the Ceausescu regime has a different perspective on the past, compatriots, and homeland than an expatriate from the era of King Mihai I. The exiles of the 1970s and 1980s harbor animosity driven by anger not only at the authoritarian regime but also at their compatriots who collaborated with it. Their departure is motivated by a sense of indignation and a desire to escape poverty, a sentiment that does not apply to the exiles of the 1940s. In contrast, Eliade [who emigrated in the 1940s] left a country

characterized by abundance, prosperity, civilization, and comfort. Conversely, the exiles of the 1970s left a society marked by desolation, profound hardship, and pervasive barbarism. The survivors of communism no longer see themselves reflected in anything that once belonged to them. The first wave of exiles thus represents those who successfully preserved Romania's European identity."

The mass exodus of Romanians in recent decades has deep roots in the travel constraints imposed during the totalitarian communist regime. These restrictions left a lasting collective trauma among ordinary citizens. Following the December 1989 revolution, a powerful desire emerged to break free from past confinement, explore the opportunities of the free world, and seek a better life in the West.

Post-communist Romania: economic, historical, and social causes of migration

The fall of the Iron Curtain left Central and Eastern Europe devastated, with widespread poverty and administrative inefficiency. This period was marked by a lack of transportation infrastructure and financial resources, as well as dysfunctional healthcare and pension system. The population, influenced by the communists and the secret services, experienced a deep distrust of their fellow citizens. This scenario underscores the notion that centralized planning and totalitarian repression ultimately culminate in comprehensive failure.

In Romania, the nascent democracy faced challenges as the anti-communist revolution of 1989 was co-opted by the former second-tier nomenklatura of the Communist Party. This situation was exacerbated by the authorities' reliance on the violence of the Jiu Valley miners to suppress political and intellectual dissent.

Amid political uncertainty and economic hardship, in the first two to three years after gaining the freedom of movement, German Saxons (called *săși*), Hungarians, and Jews were the primary emigrants from Romania, relocating to Germany, Hungary, and Israel (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 13). Between 1989 and 1991, a total of 170.000 Romanian citizens emigrated, of which 100.000 went to Germany (Mîndrican & Matei, 2023, p. 193). Of the total Romanian emigrants, approximately 130.000 belong to the national minorities mentioned above (Mîndrican & Matei, 2023, p. 193).

After the initial wave of emigration, the second half of the 1990s witnessed a moderation in emigration rates as Romanians began to pursue the so-called American Dream. This concept had been ingrained in the collective consciousness during the communist era as a means of liberation from Soviet influence. As a result, an increasing number of Romanians began to emigrate to the United States of America and Canada in the closing years of the previous millennium (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 13). In contrast to subsequent waves of emigration, this initial movement to North America consisted mainly of highly skilled individuals seeking permanent settlement. Data from the mid-2010s support this observation, showing that 54% of Romanian emigrants to the United States and 80% to Canada had tertiary qualifications (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 17). Furthermore, a significant proportion of Romanian emigrants acquired citizenship, with 76% acquiring American citizenship and 89% acquiring Canadian citizenship (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 53). Over time, the Romanian community in the United States has become more entrenched, and as of 2023, nearly half a million Americans (425,738 individuals) identify as having Romanian ancestry (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

In the early 2000s, a significant trend emerged as Romanians began to migrate to Spain and Italy. The primary motivation for this migration was economic, as wages in Spain, for example,

were reportedly up to 15 times higher than in Romania at the time (Rodriguez, 2022). Furthermore, the linguistic similarities between Romanian and the Romance languages of Spanish and Italian contributed to the ease of adaptation for migrants (Rodriguez, 2022). In addition, both Spanish and Italian authorities actively promoted Romanian migration to address labor shortages in various sectors, including construction, agriculture, tourism, and elderly care, which were often avoided by local workers (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 18; Rodriguez, 2022).

The phenomenon of Romanian migration to Spain warrants scholarly attention. Even before Romania's accession to the European Union, the labor market in Southern Europe had become increasingly accessible to Romanian workers. An important milestone in this migration was the bilateral agreement signed in Spain, in 2002, which facilitated the entry of Romanian workers into the labor market (Rodriguez, 2022). The flow of Romanian migrants to Spain increased following Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, but later stabilized as the effects of the global economic crisis took hold. Many Romanians in Spain and Italy, particularly those employed in the construction sector, were significantly affected by the crisis (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 15). Since 2012, the Romanian population in Spain has experienced a slight decline, although it has remained largely stable. This stability can be attributed to the well-established Romanian diaspora, which has been growing since the early 2000s, as well as the legalization initiatives for undocumented immigrants introduced by the Spanish government in 2000, 2001, and 2005 (Rodriguez, 2022).

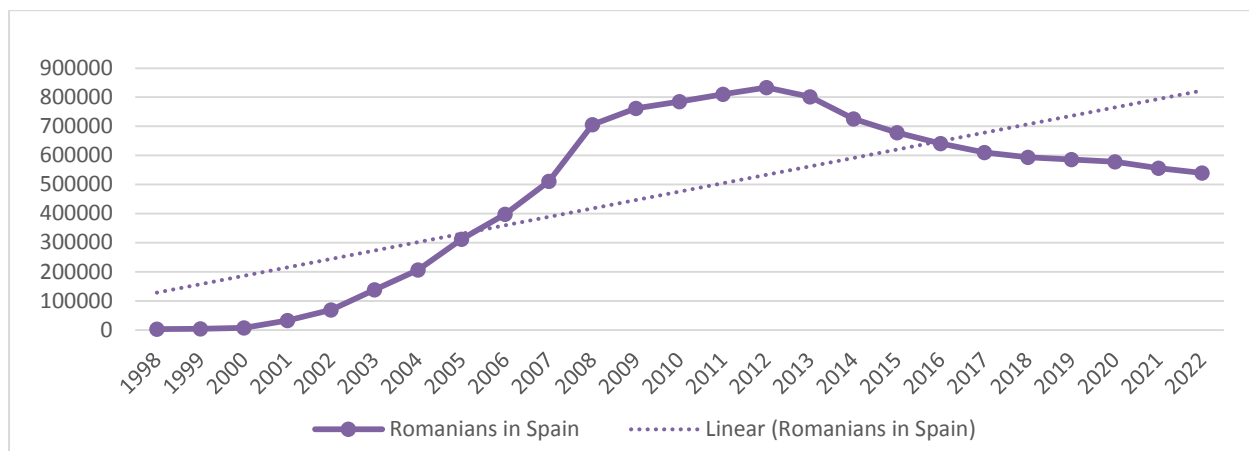


Figure 5. Romanian population in Spain from 1998 to 2022

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, n.d.

Since 2010, the primary migration flows of Romanians have shifted from Southern Europe to Germany and the United Kingdom. Unlike Spain and Italy, where the global economic crisis severely affected employment, Germany and the United Kingdom experienced less of an economic downturn, making them increasingly attractive destinations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 81). Although these labor markets were initially less accessible than those of Spain and Italy before Romania's EU accession, they gradually opened after 2007 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 81). Between 2014 and 2016, approximately half of Romanian emigrants chose Germany as their destination (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 81). As of today, the Romanian population in Germany is nearly as large as in Italy, while the number of Romanians in the United Kingdom is approaching that of the top three destination countries – Italy, Germany,

and Spain (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024, pp. 317-336) – despite the challenges posed by Brexit.

In the 1990s, a significant number of Romanians emigrated on a more permanent basis, driven by disillusionment with the harsh realities of the communist dictatorship and the betrayal of fellow citizens who had become informers. After 2000, although the total volume of Romanian emigration increased, the number of Romanians officially leaving Romania decreased.

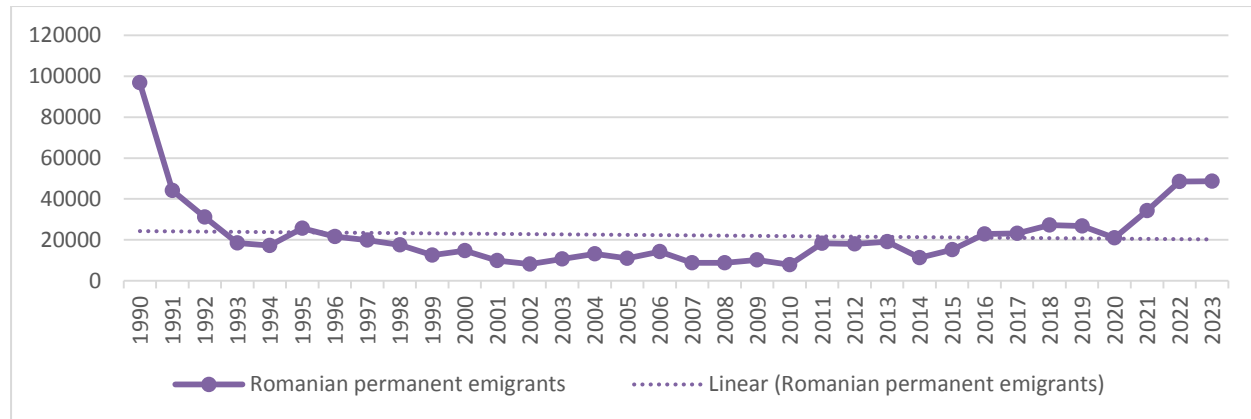


Figure 6. Number of permanent emigrants: Annual official count of Romanian citizens who permanently and officially relocated abroad from 1990 to 2023

Source: Institutul Național de Statistică, n.d.-a.

This pattern of permanent emigration suggests that in the years 2000 and 2010 Romanians were not primarily seeking to leave the country indefinitely, but rather to secure better wages, diversify their income sources, reduce the risks associated with unemployment. It is important to note that this interpretation is only one possible explanation, as the Romanian passport has gained considerable value in the labor market since 2007, making the formal process of changing residence somewhat unnecessary.

Conclusion

Over the course of a century, Romania has risen from a predominantly sedentary society to one of the most mobile and dynamic nations in the world today. According to statistics from the early 2020s, Romania ranks 17th among the leading countries of origin for international immigrants (International Organization for Migration, 2024, p. 25) and 5th in Europe (International Organization for Migration, 2024, p. 79). This development is particularly noteworthy given that the countries that surpass Romania in terms of immigrant numbers typically have larger populations or are experiencing military conflicts or humanitarian crises. Moreover, in 2023, Romania is listed among the top 10 countries of origin for foreign-born residents in 15 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024, pp. 317-336) member countries, including Hungary (1st), Italy (1st), Denmark (3rd), Spain (3rd), Austria (4th), Iceland (4th), Ireland (4th, statistical data from 2022), Belgium (5th), Germany (6th), Greece (6th, statistical data from 2016), Israel (6th), United Kingdom (6th, statistical data from 2021), Slovak Republic (7th), Czech Republic (8th), and Luxembourg (8th). The extensive presence of the Romanian diaspora in the European Union and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations is further illustrated in the accompanying graph, which shows the size of the Romanian population abroad across 14 countries.

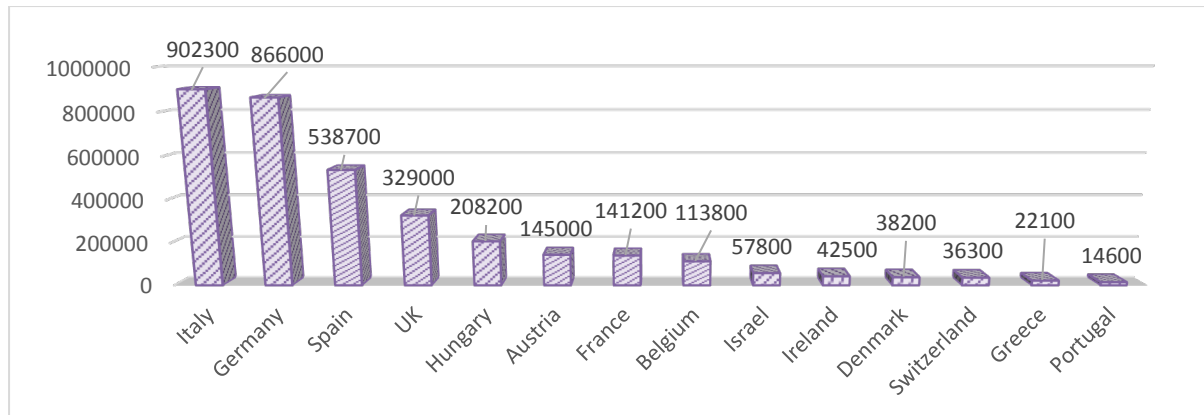


Figure 7. Romania-born population residing in 14 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development member countries

Note: Data are for the year 2023, except for Greece (2016), Ireland (2022), Portugal (2021), and the United Kingdom (2021).

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024, pp. 317-336.

Throughout the interwar period, a significant number of Romanians were constrained by the lack of professional skills and financial resources necessary for emigration. The communist regime imposed strict political controls that further limited their ability to seek better living conditions abroad. However, after the 1989 revolution, there was a notable shift as Romanians began to actively engage in international mobility. In the following decades, Romanian emigration was motivated by economic considerations, with individuals seeking higher wages and better opportunities. This phenomenon has also been influenced by the collective trauma resulting from the restrictions on migration experienced during the communist era. It is important to recognize that today the economic disparities that previously led to large-scale emigration in the 1990s and 2000s have diminished significantly. Compared to the year of Romania's accession to the European Union, the average nominal net monthly wage has quadrupled (Institutul Național de Statistică, n.d.-b), without adjusting for inflation.

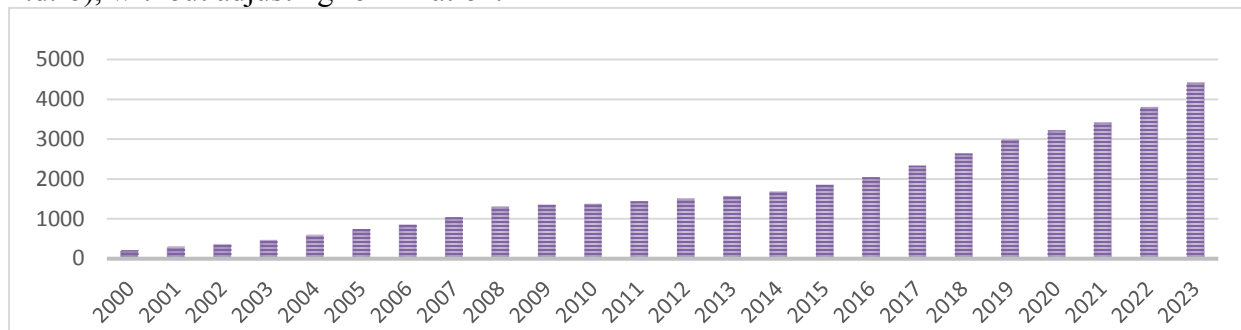


Figure 8. Nominal average net monthly salary in Romania, 2000–2023, in RON

Source: Institutul Național de Statistică, n.d.-b.

Moreover, Romania's gross domestic product per capita has increased elevenfold since 2000, reducing the economic gap between Romania and the main destination countries for Romanian emigrants.

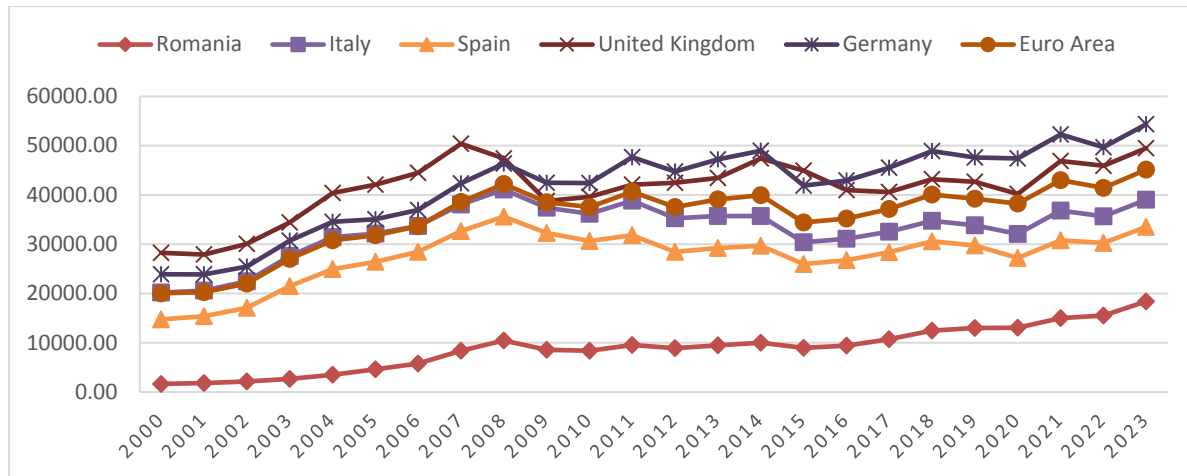


Figure 9. GDP per capita of Romania and key destination countries for Romanian emigrants, in current US dollars

Source: World Bank. (n.d.)

As economic motivations have softened and the impact of historical trauma has faded over time, cultural, social, and political factors have become increasingly important in shaping Romanian emigration. Despite improving economic conditions, many Romanians continue to settle in Western countries due to decades of deep-rooted mistrust of their country's public institutions, a failing health and education system, and insufficient highways. Sociological studies reveal that nearly four out of five Romanians lack trust in the national government and parliament (European Commission, 2023). Meanwhile, the latest opinion poll (The Center for International Research and Analyses, 2025) shows that between two-thirds and three-quarters of Romanians believe that their country is headed in the wrong direction, highlighting that healthcare, road infrastructure, and education are among the six most pressing issues facing the nation.

While the International Organization for Migration (International Organization for Migration, 2024) indicates a growing trend of Romanians returning to their homeland, emigration remained largely self-sustaining in the late 2010s, with 31% of Romanians migrating to reunite with family members already established in the West (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 16). However, the main challenge facing Romanian migrants and their welfare is the increasing prevalence of nationalist parties in Western countries. These movements make migration a central negative issue in electoral campaigns, contribute to societal polarization, and alter public perceptions of immigrants (see González Enríquez & Rinken, 2021).

Author contributions

Author A, Cristian Manolachi: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, visualization, writing - original draft, writing - review and editing.

Author B, Cristian Păun: resources, supervision.

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