MANAGING THE MIGRATORY CRISIS IN ROMANIA: UKRAINIAN REFUGEES AND THE DIFFERENT APPROACHES IN THE BALKAN ROUTE

Raluca Georgiana CHILIAN
Sapienza University of Rome
chilian.1798460@studenti.uniroma1.it

Summary: This paper follows, through historical events, legal and institutional examples, psychological analyses and the action of the media and different humanitarian associations, the traces of migrants and refugees in Romania and the treatment they receive according to their origin; and tries to understand why these differences in treatment occur. A first answer may lie in Romania's past and in the different public perception of refugees, very often resulting from manipulative communication that distorts reality.

Romania, as a member of the European Union, must show its solidarity to avoid political isolation. Nevertheless, refugees and asylum seekers rely mainly on the help of the civilian population, as concrete intervention by institutions is often lacking.

Keywords: Romania, migration, human rights, Ukraine, Balkan route

INTRODUCTION

Romania is an EU member state since 2007, it is situated in Central-Eastern Europe, bordering Bulgaria to the South, Serbia to the South-West, Hungary to the North-West, Ukraine to the North and East, Moldova to the East and the Black Sea to the South-East.

Positioning the country geographically can be useful to better understand the dynamics of migration and the influences the state receives when making decisions on the management of incoming migration flows, especially in unforeseen crisis contexts such as migration along the Balkan route and the current entries from Ukraine.

Incoming flows to Romania often represent transit migration, among the lowest in Europe, but they are nevertheless subject to political, humanitarian, and legal implications and mark important stages in the cultural and identity construction of the population.

1.   A Brief Migratory History of Romania

The Romanian historian Neagu Djuvara called Romania's history an 'intentionally deformed history[1]' , because of the various influences it has undergone over the centuries, but also because it has been the victim of many reinterpretations and rewritings, especially during the Communist years.

Ancient history

In prehistoric times, peoples called Dacians by the Romans lived in Transylvania; in Muntenia, Dobrugea and Bessarabia, they were called Getae by the Greeks, hence the identification of these peoples as Geto-Dacians.

In the 1st century A.D., the Romans began to make claims on the Dacian territories, but Decebal, succeeded in opposing Emperor Trajan, becoming the first king to reject a foreign culture. These deeds are still depicted in Trajan's Column and on the friezes of the Arch of Constantine in Rome.

The reason for these early foreign incursions were mainly the mines of

---

[1] Neagu Djuvara, O scurtă istorie ilustrată a românilor [A brief illustrated history of the Romanians], Humanitas, Bucharest, 2013.

the Apuseni Mountains in the Western Carpathians, which the Romans, as well as the Greeks, were intent on exploiting and which contributed to the creation of the myth of Dacia Felix.

A long Romanian Middle Age

This age of prosperity ended with the arrival of the Barbarians, with the so-called Völkerwanderung, the migration of peoples. Indeed, the Huns, Avars, Slavs and Hungarians arrived during this period.

The Avars settled for more than two centuries in the Banat and Transylvania and the Slavs occupied the remaining free valleys and plains while the Daco-Romans were pushed back into the wooded and mountainous areas (Transylvania means 'between the woods').

At the end of the 9th century, the Hungarians settled north of the Danube, contributing to the development of the territory, agricultural development, and the integration of various Germanic populations in Transylvania.

At the same time, the Ottoman Turks also made claims on the Romanian territories on which they imposed not only increasingly onerous tributes but also linguistic, cultural and character influences.

In the 16th century, Transylvania was in a state of political and identity confusion, but this territory became an oasis of religious tolerance for foreigners, where all religions could coexist without clashing. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, two cultures coexisted: a popular one with roots in Ancient Rome and a more recent one of Byzantine origin, transmitted by Slavs, Bulgarians, and Serbs.

The Modern Era

After the Peace of Adrianople[2] , many Jews emigrated to Moldova and Bukovina from Galicia or Russia. A feeling of unease developed among the Romanian citizens about the presence of a foreign community among them.

Following the unification of the Romanian Principalities in 1859 under Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the new Principality of Romania nevertheless

---

[2] Established on 14 September 1829, this peace ended the Russo-Turkish War and marked the beginning of Russia as the protector of Moldova and Wallachia

remained under Ottoman influence until the Congress of Berlin (1878), before becoming the Kingdom of Romania in 1881. It was decided to choose a foreign monarch, Carl of Hohenzollern, of German origin. This choice was justified by the great ethnic heterogeneity present in Romania at that time: a 'foreigner' would have been better able to maintain the balance between Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Muslim Bosnians, and Albanians, while keeping the interests of his new kingdom and his nation clear.

The Contemporary Era

At the end of the World War I, the treaties changed the ethnic, religious, and territorial aspect of the state: the population increased from 7,897,311 to 16,267,177 inhabitants, as Dobrugea, Moldova, Oltenia and Wallachia were joined by Bessarabia, the region between the Prut and the Dnestr, Bukovina, Transylvania, and part of Banat. A quarter of the population was not of Romanian ethnic origin, including Hungarians, Germans, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Jews, Armenians and Rroma, who gain their own representation in parliament.

In 1940, the Soviet Union occupied Bessarabia and northern Bukovina while Germany and Italy forced Romania to cede northern Transylvania to Hungary and southern Dobrugea to Bulgaria. The Romanian authorities' failure to resist the invasion is still seen by some historians and political scientists as a defeat, also in terms of identity, which portrayed Romania as a weak state in the eyes of its neighbours and allies[3].

After the World War II, Romania became a satellite state of the Soviet Union. On 30th December 1947, Soviet troops entered Romanian territory and the communists, in a coup d'état, proclaimed the Socialist Republic of Romania, forcing King Michael I to abdicate. From this moment on, the almost fifty years of Communism in the country severely limited contact with the outside world.

The Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu favoured the exodus of minorities because of the enormous pecuniary advantage he gained from it: between 2,000 and 8,000 dollars from the Israeli government for Jews going to Israel. The issuing of 'ethnic passports', agreed upon by the Schmidt-Ceaușescu agreement of 1979, sanctioned the beginning of real

---

[3] Djuvara, O scurtă istorie… , p. 327

paid migrations: the German Chancellor paid about 368 million dollars in trade credits to facilitate the return of about 10,000 Romanian citizens of Saxon origin to their German homeland[4] .

After the dictator's execution on 25th December 1989, Corneliu Vadim Tudor's extreme right-wing party România Mare was immediately characterised by a discriminatory campaign against the Rroma, the Hungarians and the Jews, who were accused of plotting against the country's interests and of being mainly responsible for the economic stagnation in which the country was plunged.

The 2000s

After the fall of Communism, a migratory culture began to mature in the Romanian population, which pushed it more and more to start new migratory flows. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Romania became a crossroads of peoples, cultures, and nationalities. This freedom, however, was not always viewed favourably by the EU authorities: the removal of visas for Romanian citizens in 2002 was seen as a threat due to Romania's geographical position on the borders with Moldova and Ukraine, transit countries for irregular migrants arriving from the former USSR or Central Asia. These considerations still seem to be very relevant, considering Austria's recent opposition on Romania's accession to the Schengen area, which would further facilitate the free movement of people from the East to the West of Europe. This decision was justified by Austrian Prime Minister Gerhard Karner as a fear that migration flows along the Balkan route, of which Romania and Bulgaria are the main recipients, would put further pressure on Austria's borders[5] .

To remedy the 'mass exodus' of its citizens from 2007 onwards, the government in Bucharest began to increase the quotas for workers from Asia or Africa, especially for those sectors that remained vacant, such as construction. This solution, however, did not seem to meet demographic

---

[4] Antonio Ricci, Al di là del muro: 30 anni di migrazioni dalla Romania, in Radici a metà. Trent'anni di immigrazione romena in Italia [Beyond the wall: 30 years of migration from Romania, in Half-roots. Thirty years of Romanian immigration in Italy], Istituto di Studi Politici S. Pio V e Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, Rome, 2022.

[5] Vincenzo Genovese, "La Croazia entra in Schengen, Bulgaria e Romania restano fuori" ["Croatia joins Schengen, Bulgaria and Romania remain outside"], in https://it.euronews.com/myeurope/2022/12/08/niente-schengen-per-bulgaria-e-romania.

and economic standards and, even considering that the minimum wage remains among the lowest in Europe today, foreigners are not attracted to this country, except, in urgent situations, for rapid transit in search of more satisfactory standards of living.

In this context, the psychological analysis of the levels of trust that Romanians show towards minorities seems contradictory: a form of tolerance is developed, reassured by the fact that minorities are a reality that one can accept without the need to cooperate and interact with them[6] .

To further summarise the influence that different peoples have had on the character of Romanians, the Romanian sociologist Dumitru Drăghicescu can be quoted.

He compares the figure of the Daco-Romanian to an orphan after the fall of Dacia and the Roman Empire. The arrival of the Barbarians on the territory accentuates his viciousness. The Slavs then add sociability and anarchic spirit. Hungarians and Tatars later rekindle his fighting spirit, to be adopted, when he begins to have a conscience of his own, by the Turks, who, with their impressiveness, reduce him to an inferior being, characterised by a constant passive-aggressive attitude. These negative aspects are further accentuated during the rule of the Phanariotes, considered by historians and historiographers as the 'ruin' of the Romanians' identity.

By the time this Daco-Roman orphan reaches maturity, the desire to assert himself as an individual is reborn within him. This is how he enters Communism, which brings back all the negative aspects of Romanian psychology, once again dulling his identity[7] .

This brings us to the present era, in which the 'Daco-Romanian orphan' has become an adult who maintains his duplicity, ready to adapt to the dynamics that seem most advantageous to him, but without having a well-defined strategy to impose himself as a decisive and self-confident individual.

The true Romanian ethnicity is still difficult to reassemble, but the interpretation of it conditions public opinion and the behaviour of

---

[6] Daniel David, Psihologia poporului român. Profilul psihologic al românilor într-o monografie cognitiv-experimentală [Psychology of the Romanian people. The psychological profile of the Romanians in a cognitive-experimental monograph], Iași, Polirom, 2015, pp. 267-268

[7] Ibidem, pp. 39-40

citizens when they see their territory 'threatened' by the arrival of foreign populations.

2. Reaction to the Current Migration Crisis

A study conducted by the International Organization of Migration Romania between March and May 2022 shows that 98% of the refugees present at that time on Romanian territory were Ukrainians and the rest of them came from Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Russian Federation and Turkmenistan[8].

The rights of the refugees

According to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is someone who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.[9]"

Migrants, on the other hand, choose to move to improve their own prospects and those of their families. Refugees must move to save their lives or safeguard their freedom.

In the case of Ukrainians, it could be argued that their displacement falls into both categories under the Convention. In any case, one of the most important principles defined by the 1951 Convention is that refugees must not be deported or returned to the borders of territories where their life and freedom would be threatened. Generally, individual interviews are conducted with all applicants crossing the border to obtain refugee status. In this case, as the reason for their movement is clear, citizens from Ukraine are immediately defined as 'first-stage refugees' and enjoy simplified procedures.

With the beginning of the Ukrainian exodus, many African refugees in Ukraine took the opportunity to head for Europe. Videos intercepted by

[8] IOM Romania, UKRAINE RESPONSE 2022 – ROMANIA 25 MARCH – 23 MAY 2022

[9] Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Chapter 1, Article 1(2), https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-relating-status-refugees,1951

Lighthouse Reports[10] show how African migrants are not allowed to board evacuation trains.

The legal, institutional, and humanitarian point of view

From the end of February and throughout 2022, guidance was issued every month on how to deal with the arrival of foreign nationals and stateless persons in 'extraordinary' situations from Ukraine.

Among the Romanian government's initiatives to encourage the reception of Ukrainian refugees there is the government programme dubbed 50/20: for each Ukrainian refugee hosted by a Romanian citizen, the executive pays 50 lei for the day's rent and 20 lei for meals to be distributed to Ukrainians, equivalent to 2,100 lei per month[11].

At a press conference on 5 March 2022 at the reception centre in Siret, Suceava County, the President of Romania Klaus Iohannis, in addition to praising the great solidarity with which the population has welcomed refugees from Ukraine, also recalled the extraordinary management of the crisis by the authorities.

The General Inspectorate for Immigration (IGI) is regularly present at the centre, and so is the European Union Asylum Agency and various NGOs offering additional services such as the Romanian National Council for Refugees for legal advice, the World Health Organisation and the Ministry of Health for medical advice, the International Organisation of Migration to provide information against human trafficking, transport and accommodation, psychological counselling, and protection[12].

The agency also contributes to socioeconomic inclusion and resilience building by offering Romanian language courses, employment and counselling centres, coaching programmes, and assistance in the protection application process.

The European agencies have also launched a campaign to inform citizens in transit of the risks they may face during their journey.

---

[10] Lighthouse Reports, "Ukraine exodus", https://www.lighthousereports.nl/investigation/ukraine-exodus/, 2022

[11] Approximately 425 euros

[12] UNHCR, Operational Data Portal - Ukraine Refugee Situation, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine

Public opinion reaction

Interviewed along the borders, most civilians prove to be receptive, some even stating that "it could happen to us at any time" and that "the Romanian is welcoming par excellence", although there is no lack of hostile and unwelcoming attitudes, dictated, in most cases, by unfamiliar situations.

Professor Răzvan Pantelimon, a historian and university lecturer at the Faculty of History and Political Science at Ovidius University in Constanța, analysed in detail what has happened in Romanian public opinion:

> At the beginning it was [...] ordinary citizens who opened their homes. Over time, however, public opinion slowly changed, particularly in the complex world of social networks. [...] In Romania there is a lack of political formations directly attacking refugees, but creeping through the web is an unease, a polemic. And the usual demand: let us help our old people and children first[13].

Disinformation and fake news

The Romanian Information Service (SRI) is an institution designated since 2006 to fight against disinformation and to control the communications that are passed on to citizens, but its reports on the subject are meagre and lack incisive. On the official website, there is no information on the war, the last update on fake news dates to the pandemic and contains general information that does not effectively warn of the risks that bad information or communication can cause.

To combat misinformation, therefore, several online platforms have sprung up that report on the fake news formed during this period. These fake news stories have influenced the way the population has perceived the arrival of refugees and the type of reception given to them.

One of them concerns the news that following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Romania will welcome many Africans and Asians, and the Romanian authorities are supposedly keeping their nationality secret to avoid alarmism.

---

[13] Christian Elia, "Cosa ne è stato dei rifugiati in Romania?" [What happened to the refugees in Romania?], https://openmigration.org/analisi/cosa-ne-e-stato-dei-rifugiati-ucraini-in-romania/, 2022.

The news concerns the extension of temporary protection for family members and relatives of stateless persons and foreigners in Ukraine, who will be able to live in Romania, thus also for citizens of nationalities other than Ukrainian. The narration created by this news predicts an "invasion of foreigners", refugees from Africa and Asia. The image of Romania as a 'too tolerant' country is thus spread. The aim is to induce xenophobic and racist attitudes fuelled by Russian propaganda[14]. This is how a form of scepticism towards the war developed. This mistrust was also fuelled in the first days of the conflict by the airing of unverified news on the main national broadcasters. In fact, a Romanian TV station, Antena 3, broadcast at a peak time images that were analysed by journalists and military strategists commenting on the alleged air strikes over the Sea of Azov between Russian and Ukrainian forces[15].

A few hours after the release of these images, several news sites reported the same video aired by the broadcaster, but also indicated its real source: a 2013 military-themed video game[16].

The seriousness of this error suggests the lack of competence shown by journalists and the lack of accuracy and reliability of the sources, representatives, and spokesmen of the Ministry of National Defence. Several NGOs have created a civil task force to combat the disinformation that has spread during this year of war: an online platform that analyses articles, blogs, social networks, to uncover fake news. Unfortunately, this platform has not been very successful and has not been looked on favourably by the institutions either. Government representatives, in fact, claim that the only official information should be the one which they pass on, and now their only online concern seems to be accusations of high-level corruption and plagiarism of ministers' dissertations. Civil initiatives are not encouraged.

---

[14] Mădălin Necșuțu, "FAKE NEWS: România va fi invadată de africani și asiatici veniți din Ucraina" [FAKE NEWS: Romania will be invaded by Africans and Asians from Ukraine], https://www.veridica.ro/stiri-false/fake-news-romania-va-fi-invadata-de-africani-si-asiatici-veniti-din-ucraina, 2022.

[15] Anca Simina, "Un război pentru minţile oamenilor. Cum se face propagandă rusă în România" [A war for people's minds. How Russian propaganda is made in Romania], https://recorder.ro/un-razboi-pentru-mintile-oamenilor-cum-se-face-propaganda-rusa-in-romania/, 2022.

[16] Cristina Radu, " Antena 3 a prezentat din eroare imagini dintr-un joc video din 2013 ca fiind din războiul Rusiei împotriva Ucrainei" [Antena 3 mistakenly presented footage from a 2013 video game as being from Russia's war against Ukraine], https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/antena-3- a-prezentat-din-eroare-imagini-dintr-un-joc-video-din-2013-ca-fiind-din-razboiul-rusiei-impotriva-ucrainei-4005144 , 2022.

Psychological analysis of Romanians' reactions

Psychologists define the Romanian culture as a collectivist one: the individual's behaviour is influenced by his or her position in a group, often the family group, and he or she expresses his opinion in an aggregate manner.

Romania has a 'women's culture': consensual, based on cooperation, modesty and caring for the weakest, as it is also shown by the great willingness shown towards Ukrainian women and their children. It presents itself as a conservative country, little inclined to change, which is why it is generally preferable for Romanians to interact with people who have similar cultural and traditional experiences to their own.

In general, the main characteristic of Romanian citizens towards strangers is mistrust, which is also manifested in the average interpersonal distance, generally higher than in the other countries and cultures analysed, significantly towards individuals and cultures they do not know[17] .

What has happened in the crisis in recent months is an example of a welcome based on a feeling of "personal" closeness linked to geographical borders, but also cultural and traditional closeness, which makes Ukrainians much more similar to Romanians than other migrants arriving from more distant territories.

3.   Management of Migration Crisis in the Romanian Balkan Route

Despite the incoming migration flows that have occurred in recent years, Romania is one of the European countries with the lowest immigration rate (>2.5% of the population in 2021), perhaps because of this it has a very narrow and isolationist view of integration, dictated by fear and hostility, which is also manifested towards ethnic minorities within the country.

The economic boom in Romania in the 1990s led to an intensification of migration flows, attracting citizens from Moldova, China, and Turkey. With the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2007, however, there has also been a collapse in the entries of foreigners, both regular and irregular, discouraged not only by the crisis but also by the country's geographical location. Previously, in fact, citizens from East Asia (Bangladesh, Pakistan) travelled through the Russian Federation, the Republic of Moldova,

---

[17] David, Psihologia… p. 129

Ukraine, and Romania before arriving in Europe via Hungary.

From the 2000s, these were also joined by Afghans and Iraqis fleeing the war, who travelled via Turkey-Bulgaria-Romania to reach Western Europe. With the outbreak of the Arab Spring, in the second half of 2011, social movements in North Africa also increased the influx of citizens from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Syria, who entered Romania illegally, sending the migration and asylum application management system into crisis.

In the last decade, the situation has been aggravated by the conflict in Syria, the expansion of the conflict in Iraq and the rise of terrorist groups, the unstable situations on Romania's borders (Ukraine and Transnistria), Israeli-Palestinian tensions, the increase in illegal migration through Turkey, the first transit stop to Europe for migrants from the Middle East and Africa, and the construction of 'anti-migrant' walls along the borders of some European countries[18].

The legal and institutional point of view

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is based on the redemption of the fundamental rights of all individuals, and it is interesting to analyse some of the articles, to discover how they are contradicted by the behaviour and actions implemented by the Romanian authorities during the migration crisis that affected the Balkans.

Art 2 (1) Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.

Art 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Art 14 (1): Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution[19].

---

[18] Strategia națională din 23 septembrie 2015 privind imigrația pentru perioada 2015-2018 (Anexa nr. 1)[National Immigration Strategy of 23 September 2015 for the period 2015-2018 (Annex 1)], http://www.monitoruljuridic.ro/act/strategie-na-ional-din-23-septembrie-2015-privind-imigra-ia-pentru-perioada-2015- 2018-anexa-nr-1-emitent-guvernul-173049.html, 2015.

[19] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/english, 1948.

Some argue, first, that offering the same rights as Romanian citizens to migrants and refugees, including those who entered the territory illegally, undermines national sovereignty and is an obstacle to exercising one's rights.

One can see an inconsistency between the law of the state and the international treaties to which it adheres. Indeed, while Romanian citizens are the holders of national sovereignty, at the same time they must submit to provisions such as the recognition of universal rights and the 'safe and orderly' integration of foreigners on their territory.

Asylum seekers in an EU Member State are also protected by the Dublin III Regulation[20] , which is supposed to offer them protection until their status is verified and creates a system for detecting problems with the reception mechanism, to combat their causes and manage arrivals to avoid migration crises. Such a system should counteract the malfunctioning of national asylum systems and help EU countries guarantee international protection regardless of the number of arrivals at their borders.

Emblematic in this sense is the decision of the Court of Genoa that in November 2021 rejected the transfer to Romania of an Afghan woman and her minor child, due to the risk of exposing the subjects to 'inhuman and degrading treatment[21]' .

"*Migrația este un proces care trebuie gestionat și nu o problemă care trebuie rezolvată* "[22], so opens the National Migration Strategy of 23 September 2015 for immigration for the period 2015-2018[23] .

The general principles on which the Strategy is based are legality, accountability, guarantee of sovereignty, cooperation and consistency, respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, and transparency.

---

[20] Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 (Dublin III Regulation), The European Union asylum policy: determining the country in the Union responsible for examining applications, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32013R0604, 2013.

[21] Alessandra Ballerini, Regolamento Dublino – Annullato il trasferimento dei richiedenti in Romania per gravi carenze nell'accoglienza e rischio rimpatrio in Afghanistan, [Dublin Regulation - Transfer of applicants to Romania cancelled due to serious reception deficiencies and risk of repatriation to Afghanistan], https://www.meltingpot.org/2021/11/487702/, 2021.

[22] "Migration is a phenomenon to be managed, not a problem to be solved".

[23] Available at http://www.monitoruljuridic.ro/act/strategie-na-ional-din-23-septembrie-2015-privind-imigra-iapentru-perioada-2015-2018-anexa-nr-1-emitent-guvernul-173049.html

Much of the Strategy proposed in 2015 is based on Romania's accession to the Schengen area, an accession rejected by the EU following Austria's vote against in December 2022. Accession would have made it easier to recognise migrants and their right to transit or stay in Romania. The definition of a 'foreigner' according to Emergency Ordinance 194/2002, reissued in August 2022, means a person who does not have Romanian citizenship or citizenship of another European Union or European Economic Area member state or citizenship of the Swiss Confederation[24] .

It follows, therefore, that even citizens fleeing from more remote wars, such as those in Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq, are foreigners to be considered in the same way as Ukrainians and have the same rights when it comes to asylum applications.

To clear the borders crowded with the large number of refugees that arrived mainly in countries such as Greece, Italy, and Hungary in 2015, the European Union proposed a relocation system based on mandatory quotas of refugees that member states would have to take in.

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis was initially balanced and impartial in his judgments about the redistribution of migrants, willing to offer solidarity. However, what appeared unfair to the representative of the state was the imposition of accepting 6,350 refugees, when the capacity of the country's facilities was a maximum of 1,785.

The reticence towards immigrants in 2015 was also fuelled by the escalation of jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe, based on the stereotype that terrorists are Muslim citizens from conflict zones while in fact, in most cases, they are attackers born, raised, and radicalised on European soil.

Many Romanian citizens still firmly believe that the European leaders' half-hearted policy towards migration will lead to a 'Muslimisation' of the continent, with individuals coming from a closed, radical culture different from the European one.

Another important factor that fuelled this phobia is the elaboration of the counter-terrorism strategy, which coincided with the period of legislating

---

[24] *Ordonanța de urgență nr. 194 din 12 decembrie 2002 privind regimul străinilor în România * – Republicare,* [Emergency Ordinance No 194 of 12 December 2002 on the regime of foreigners in Romania * - Republishing], https://www.mae.ro/sites/default/files/file/anul_2020/pdf_2020/oug-194-2002-forma-sintetica-pentru-data-2020-09- 25.pdf, 2002.

for the strategy of de-radicalisation of societies and the strategy on migration in Europe, creating disquiet among European citizens, who believed that the phenomena were closely related.After the Council vote in favour of compulsory quotas in the EU, the Romanian President admitted defeat but still guaranteed that Romania would take in refugees, even though, due to long bureaucratic procedures and chaotic management of transfers, they never arrived in such large numbers. Beyond the outcome of this vote, to which Hungary and Romania did not agree, the language adopted by the political representatives of the two countries is essential to understand their position.Studies have analysed the discursive strategies and the influence these had on the population[25] .

Klaus Iohannis's 2014 election campaign had as its slogan 'less show, less noise', and his moderate discursive style retraces this path.

It is clear from his speeches that Romania's opposition to compulsory quotas depends on logistical factors and limitations that are not dependent on its solidarity: the use of the conditional and the hypothetical period are indicators of a willingness to seek solutions and, at the same time, express an awareness of its own limitations and management capacities, with the intention of positioning the country in a high level of appreciation as a responsible member of the Union:

> *Aceste locuri sunt disponibile în şase centre de primire, care există în România în ziua de astăzi. Însă problema este mult mai complicată decât simpla primire. [...] Nu ar fi foarte complicat, să zicem, să transformăm o veche cazarmă în centru de primire, dar România nu are capacitatea să integreze pe aceşti refugiaţi în societate. We, repet, suntem solidari cu celelalte ţări, însă trebuie să vedem cât putem noi să facem, atât să facem, şi mai mult nu putem acum[26] .*

---

[25] Kinga Kolumbán, Saying 'No' to Immigration Quota: An Analysis of Evaluative Language in Hungarian and Romanian Political Discourse, in" Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica" vol.13, n. 2 / 2021, https://doi.org/10.2478/ausp-2021-0019, 2021, pp.161-176.

[26] "These places are available in six reception centres in Romania today; however, the problem is more complicated than just reception [...]. It would not be very complicated, let's say, to turn an old barracks into a reception centre, but Romania does not have the capacity to integrate these refugees into society. We, I repeat, are in solidarity with other countries, but we must see how much we can do, that we do, and now we cannot do more."

Nevertheless, through this monotonous and moderate attitude, the President also expresses awareness of the possibility of overreactions from the population, encouraging responsible behaviour:

> *Putem să tratăm chestiunea cu calm, cu răspundere, cu solidaritate faţă de ţările unde există un număr mare de refugiaţi. Nu este cazul să reacţionăm isteric, cum, sigur, nu este cazul să ne arătăm latura xenofobă* [27].

The President's position on the migration issue is also moderate because Romania is considered an involved third party. The application of compulsory quotas would call into question the principles according to which the European Union works. To express his disappointment with the mandatory quotas, he uses language that expresses a negative judgment through formulas such as 'inappropriate', 'bureaucratic', 'mathematical calculations', etc....

> *Ceea ce nu considerăm că este o soluţie şi nu considerăm că este oportun e să vorbim despre cote obligatorii, calculate într-un mod foarte birocratic, contabiliceşte, aș putea spune, fără a consulta statele membre. [...] Eu nu cred credă că impunerea cotelor obligatorii, impunerea printr-un vot majoritar, rezolvă această problemă*[28].

The communicative style adopted in these contexts is relevant because it influences the perception of citizens, who in most cases follow the same line of thought as their representative. In this case, the Romanian president's firm opposition to the mandatory quotas and the subsequent discontent also fuelled Romanians' disapproval of refugees.

The (violated) rights of refugees and public reaction

Most refugees enter Romania from Serbia and often settle in Timişoara or the surrounding areas, in the hope of being able to reach Europe through

---

[27] "We can deal with this issue calmly, responsibly and in solidarity with the countries where there are large numbers of refugees. It is not the case to react hysterically, and it is certainly not the case to show our xenophobic side."

[28] "What we do not consider to be a solution and what we consider to be inappropriate is to talk about compulsory quotas, calculated in a very bureaucratic way, accounting I would say, without consulting the member states. [...] I do not believe that the imposition of compulsory quotas, imposed through a majority vote, solves this problem."

Hungary, a country in the Schengen area, which would then allow free movement in the European Union.

Since 2015, when the migratory flow intensified, several programmes of cooperation, assistance and relocation of migrants have been implemented. Thanks to the collaboration between institutions and humanitarian associations on the Romanian territory, several criminal networks have been identified and closed. The resulting arrests, in some cases, were also reported and emphasised by the local and foreign media, becoming real international media cases[29] .

In 2021, several witnesses and refugees condemned the poor hygienic conditions of the Romanian reception centres due to overcrowding. The premises were described as dirty, poorly equipped, and unhealthy, dilapidated. Some of the centres underwent maintenance and renovation work, but this caused further discomfort, as the need arose to reduce their capacity, forcing refugees to look for another placement or to renounce protection and asylum in Romania.

In the reception centres, refugees also encountered language and interpersonal difficulties and confessed that their chances of integration and relations with the civilian population and authorities depended heavily on the interests and skills of interpreters and cultural mediators. Other testimonies described these centres as prisons for the refugees, who lived in very poor and inhuman conditions, with racist, xenophobic, and homophobic authorities who treated them like animals[30] .

Despite these complaints, IGI representatives denied the allegations, claiming that no official complaint had been filed. The reason is simple: asylum seekers have little confidence in the system, and they fear that a complaint could hinder their chances of obtaining asylum in Romania.

Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) is an organisation that has been documenting illegal and mass expulsions and police violence along the EU borders in the Western Balkans, Greece, and Turkey since 2016[31] .

---

29 Dan Fifoiu, "Traficanţii de speranţe. Promisiunea unei vieţi mai bune" [Hope mongers. The promise of a better life], https://intelligence.sri.ro/traficantii-de-sperante-promisiunea-unei-vieti-mai-bune/, 2022.

30 Mircea Barbu, "Exclusiv Hăituiţi de talibani, refugiaţi la Timişoara: „România nu e o ţară, e o închisoare", [Exclusive Hunted by Taliban, refugees in Timisoara: "Romania is not a country, it's a prison"] https://romania.europalibera.org/a/31231490.html, 2021.

31 BORDER VIOLENCE MONITORING NETWORK, Submission to the Committee on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, https://www.borderviolence.eu/wp-content/uploads/BVMN_CESCR_Romania.pdf

Most of the testimonies regarding the Romanian Border Police's unbecoming conduct towards migrants come from Timişoara and report expulsions to Serbia.

The expulsions recorded all follow the same script: seizure of personal property, physical and psychological violence, even coercion to physical exercises and other forms of torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatments.

On 17 February 2020, 27 people from Iran, Syria and Iraq were apprehended by the Arad Border Police 50 metres from the Hungarian border. The migrants were taken to the police station, searched, photographed, and filed. They also had to sign documents in Romanian without understanding their meaning, as the interpreter, rather than translating, only urged them to sign those papers in order not to be hit by the officers. The group of migrants had expressed their intention to seek asylum and protection in Romania, but they were denied. After four days without water, food, and medical assistance, they were transferred to another police station and again filed and finally arrived at a reception camp.

According to BVMN, here the migrants refused to sign any more documents, so the authorities did it for them: they were banned from returning to Romania for one and a half years. They were thus escorted to Serbia and forced to pay 50 euros fine for crossing the border [32].

Among the many violations highlighted by this episode, it should be noted that, according to Romanian law, escorted refoulement should only take place in cases where the migrant refuses to do so voluntarily and must be supervised by an IGI officer. In this case, neither of these provisions is fulfilled.

The pandemic has made people more sceptical and violent, especially towards those who undertake these harsh journeys, who are seen as threats due to their mostly Muslim background, but are also identified as sources of contagion, not least because of the poor personal hygiene they are forced to undergo during the journey.

On 17 June 2020, new testimonies describe 3 Afghan asylum seekers who

---

[32] BVMN, "" We felt criminals" regarding a Romanian detention center", https://www.borderviolence. eu/violencereports/february-17-2020-0000-stopped-near-arad-romania/, 2020.

were insulted, hit with batons and other blunt objects, and their belongings were destroyed by 12 Romanian officers and 2 Serbian policemen in a forest 15 kilometres from Timișoara.

> Do not worry, we will not wear your clothes, we will burn them; you will see the smoke in the sky[33].

Several similar incidents were reported during January 2021 against Afghan, Pakistani and Iranian citizens, who, upon entering Romanian territory, had expressed their wish to seek asylum and protection in Romania. These are some of the responses received from the Romanian police:

> Why are you coming to our country? You are a big problem for us. Shut up. (...) Go back to your country.

> If you come back here again, we will break your legs and hands[34].

> Don't come back to Romania![35]

According to international treaties and regulations, it is illegal to deport migrants before giving them the chance to apply for asylum. The European Union, through its actions, tries to ensure internal security and at the same time respect for fundamental human rights. However, it has no jurisdiction over the enforcement bodies of the various member states and consequently its control over their conduct is limited.

The presence of illegal residents also negatively affects the labour market, as their integration and social cohesion is made difficult by the lack of management regulations. Foreign workers are more vulnerable to employers, who often abuse their status, taking advantage of the immigrants' lack of understanding of the language and thus their inability to redeem their legal rights as workers.

These episodes occurring all along the EU border, as well as the positions adopted by national and international authorities, increase feelings of

---

33 BVMN, "Medication stolen to deter crossing into Romania, https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/june-15-2020-0000-near-kikinda-serbia/, 2020.

34 BVMN, "I couldn't feel anything, I didn't know where I was (…) I thought that my bones were broken, I couldn't speak, I couldn't breathe", https://www.borderviolence.eu/violence-reports/january-

23-2021-0500-near-jimboliaromania/, 2021.

35 BVMN, "They took their phones, money and jackets and lit them on fire", https://www.borderviolence.eu/violencereports/january-30-2021-0230-near-kikinda-serbia/, 2021.

hostility and fear towards migrants arriving from the Middle East or Africa, who are perceived as dangerous and totally different entities.

The result is the alienation of the foreigner and the criminalisation of migration.In the eyes of Romanian public opinion, refugees are a Western European problem, especially now that the European Union has rejected the state's accession to the Schengen area. This is why all actions presented through the media that feature refugees from the Middle East are emphasised with indignation, especially if they are criminal actions or deviant from the Romanian reality.Some trade union representatives are against increasing the number of immigrant workers in Romania or suggest stricter regulatory measures and controls[36] .

Trade unions are reluctant to accept foreign immigrants because this would lead to social problems and lower wages. The trade unions are willing to accept these risks and argue that the legal employment of foreigners could benefit the whole of society.

Other communication strategies and fake news

The dualism with which the two crises are treated can also be seen in the international media. The words used represent exactly the attitude of the population towards the migrants, which changes depending on where they come from.The Romanians 'jump into action' to help the Ukrainians, their solidarity is witnessed by photos and the terms used celebrate their compassion, the efficiency with which they are received and the readiness to intervene. In an article from 14 April 2022 published by Aljazeera, a statement made for the international press by a spokesman for the Suceava Border Police is also reported:

> Romanians are characterised by our solidarity and this situation amplifies that quality; everyone is motivated to make the people arriving from Ukraine feel safe. We are policemen, but first, we are human beings[37] .

About the flow of migrants from the Middle East, the terms used in the

---

[36] Ovidiu Voicu / Georgiana Toth / Simina Guga, Imigrant în România: Perspective și riscuri [Immigrants in Romania: Prospects and Risks], Fundația Soros România, https://ec.europa.eu/migrantintegration/sites/default/files/2011-02/docl_18857_14356252.pdf, 2008.

[37] Omar Havana, "Photos: Romanians jump into action for Ukrainian refugees", https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2022/4/14/photos-russia-ukraine-war-refugees-romania, 2022.

international press become negative: 'illegally pushing refugees back', 'denied people', 'physical abuse', 'violent campaign', 'clandestine action', reinforced by reports, testimonies, and investigations by human rights organisations. In this case, no law enforcement representatives are interviewed, but an Amnesty International researcher states that:

> In numerous countries [...] people in search of safety and protection are being met with barbed wire and armed border guards, [...] the EU's migration policy had for years now prioritised border security over the rights of people and its fundamental values[38] .

This dualism also shows the image that Romania has created for itself over the years: welcoming and helpful to those who are similar to it, aggressive, violent and xenophobic towards those whom it considers different and, consequently, dangerous.

Psychological and sociological analysis of Romanians' reactions

The Romanian psychologist and politician Constantin Rădulescu-Motru argued that the actions of Romanians are often guided by the opinion of others: they behave as others expect of them, following their social conscience, not their individual one. Perhaps the hostility shown towards the dislocated populations of the Middle East depends precisely on this spirit of aggregation: the xenophobic attitude shown may not be genuine but dictated by the image that world public opinion has formed of the Romanian character throughout history.

Other distinctive aspects of the Romanian character identified by the experts are related to cynicism, indifference, and misanthropic beliefs, derived from scepticism and lack of trust in others. Aspects such as hostility and anti-social attitudes derive from Romanian tendency to adopt a repressive and defensive style in dealing with others. This style leads Romanians to increase their defence and coping mechanisms to avoid uncertainties and control anxieties that may arise from contact with a different culture such as that of Afghan refugees. As a collectivist culture, positive emotions are projected onto one's own group, negative ones onto other groups[39] , foreigners in this case.

In the case of the Romanian population, self-affirmation occurs in two

---

[38] David Child, "Croatia, Greece, Romania illegally pushing refugees back: Report", https://www. aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/7/croatia-greece-romania-illegal-pushbacks-borders, 2021

39 David, Psihologia…, pp 178-180

different stages: through the exclusion of the Afghan, Pakistani, Iranian, or Iraqi refugee, it reaffirms and reinforces its identity, while through the inclusion of the Ukrainian refugee, mainly a woman or a child, in its society, it manifests openness towards the outside world and welcomes the change brought by the foreigner. These identity interpretations based on prejudices and paradigmatic assumptions, which permeate through the media even in general Romanian public opinion, feed a racist attitude based on moral panic[40] towards those perceived as a threat to society's values and interests. Ukrainians are welcomed with open arms, in society and in the media, because they do not have elements in their culture that would cause great surprise or imbalance. Refugees from the Middle East and Africa, on the contrary, are a threat to national identity and are not allowed to approach even the borders of the state: this type of treatment is the one that spreads most in the international sphere; it is the negative sentiments and behaviour that become identity stereotypes and a source of prejudice.

CONCLUSION

The migratory crisis recorded in the Balkans since 2015 and the more recent one from Ukraine have been analysed from different points of view, to identify the elements that have determined the adoption of different reception and integration models for refugees.The measures put into practice, which differ according to the nationality of the asylum seekers, are greatly influenced by the political and economic implications of the reception and management of arrivals in Romania. The country has repeatedly tried to adapt its internal policies to the values of the European Union, but there is still a long way to go to ensure equality, the right to free movement and adequate information.The low number of foreigners in Romania could be an explanation for the sceptical and hostile attitudes towards migrants from the Middle East. The lack of multiculturalism and the little confrontation with realities different from its own contribute to directing otherness towards refugees. Ignorance of other cultures also makes its way into public opinion through the media, presenting the image of the enemy that threatens the Romanian collective identity and its cultural

---

[40] Ricci, Radici a metà… p. 58

and religious integrity[41] .

If the Romanian manages to identify commonalities with the Other, as is the case with the Ukrainians, he or she activates mechanisms of solidarity and compassion. In the interaction with refugees from the Middle East, on the other hand, he or she sees a threat to his or her own identity and activates defensive mechanisms that he or she is unable to manage except through hostile and violent attitudes, such as the rejections exercised by the Romanian authorities along the border with Serbia.

Thus, due to its geographical position, Romania continues to be a buffer state between the West and the East, but it has not yet managed to adapt to international requirements and constantly demonstrates that it is unable to manage its borders or comply with the agreements it made.

The different approaches in migration crisis management models are manifested, for example, in the consideration given to refugees. Generally, individual interviews are conducted with all applicants crossing the border to obtain this status. In the case of Ukrainian nationals, the reason for their movement is taken for granted and they are immediately defined as 'first-stage refugees' and enjoy simplified procedures.

Afghans, Iraqis, Syrians, when they are not rejected at the border, can aspire to 'tolerated' status, which entitles them to stay in the country for six months. Already this definition indicates a sense of antipathy and isolation of the foreigner[42] . The medias amplify the feelings and perceptions of otherness, hatred, and xenophobia, especially towards Muslim refugees: in the articles that have appeared on the web, the problem of integrating and welcoming Ukrainians has never been raised, even the police and the authorities have shown solidarity. Citizens from the Middle East, on the other hand, are always presented as undesirable and dangerous subjects, who would not only represent a terrorist threat to the whole of Europe but would also jeopardise the social and cultural equilibrium of Romania.

---

[41] Roberto Gritti, Oriente/Occidente: mappe cognitive in "Oltre l'Orientalismo e l'Occidentalismo. La rappresentazione dell'Altro nello spazio euro-mediterraneo", [East/West: cognitive maps in "Beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism. The Representation of the Other in the Euro-Mediterranean Space], Milan, Guerini e associati, 2009, p. 48.

[42] Raluca Viman Miller / Florin N. Fesnic, Migration and Political Tolerance in Romania in" Ronald King & Paul Sum (eds.), Romania under Băsescu: Aspirations, Achievements, and Frustrations during his First Presidential Term." Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, https://www.academia.edu/57757313/Migration_and_Political_Tolerance_in_Romania, 2011, pp. 257-270

The medias become an instrument of propaganda, often intensifying xenophobic and racist behaviour based on refugees' ethnicity, nationality, and religion. The National Strategy for Migration Management, although it reaffirms the state's commitment to protect and safeguard human life within and outside its borders, is interpreted differently depending on the type of refugee to which it should apply, and the political stance Romania should take at the international level.

Migration, even when it occurs in crisis situations, should be a factor of enrichment for the host countries, because in a globalised world such as the current one, the affirmation of one's own identity also passes through the possibility of coexisting peacefully by drawing on knowledge of the other without the prejudices that are often consolidated by the mass media[43]. There is, however, a solution that could guarantee a social and cultural evolution in a positive sense: to change either improve the mentality of a population where the illiteracy and school dropout rate is very high, it would be necessary to start with the upbringing of the masses.

Programmes could be implemented that educate young people and adults in a way of thinking based on knowledge, respect for oneself and others, a correct application and interpretation of civic and religious values, and a correct use of words.

---

[43] Roberto Gritti, Oltre l'Orientalismo… p. 12