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# **The Role of Romania in the Current European Union Refugee Crisis: is the Country Able to Integrate Asylum Seekers?**

## **Abstract**

*This research examines the role Romania played in the current refugee/migration crisis, and the measures that it has taken in order to integrate the incoming refugees. Quantitative analysis was used in order to reveal the perceptions of the citizens towards the third country nationals at the beginning and after the refugee crisis. We argue that Romania represents a paradox, as it is mostly a country of emigrants with millions of Romanian citizens living, studying or working abroad in other EU/non-EU states. Thus, the question is, will Romania be able to handle the increased number of asylum claims from third country nationals and their subsequent accommodation and integration, if it cannot stop its own citizens from going abroad and making a living there?*

**Key words: integration, emigration, immigration, mandatory relocation, sociological integration theory, refugee crisis.**

**JEL Classification: F22, F50, J60, K37.**

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## Introduction

If we look at the historical and demographic landscape of Romania, we can state that it has never been a great colonial/expansionist country or a migration target of extra-European Communities. However, looking at its ethnic map, we notice that besides the Romanian majority there are various ethnic communities with different cultural, linguistic and religious traditions. Among the ethnic minorities we find: Hungarians, Roma, Ukrainians, Germans, Russians-Lipovans, Turks, Tatars, Serbian, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Croatians, Greeks, Jews, Czechs, Polish, Italians, Chinese, Armenians, Csangos, and Macedonians etc. So, in case of Romania we can speak about ethnic pluralism, but at the same time there are almost none extra-European. However, the current refugee crisis opened some new opportunities for the Romanian citizens to get acquainted with communities from outside of Europe, as under the mandatory relocation quota proposed by the EU, Romania has committed to take and integrate 6351 refugees from the Greek and Italian camps. Due to the fact that since the 90s not more than 40.000 people applied for asylum in Romania, the integration of third country nationals in that period did not make the top of the political agenda in the country. For years, Romania was known only as a transit and not as a destination country for people in need of international protection. However, the current statistics show a growing number of asylum seekers applying to stay at country level, a phenomenon that requires a coherent strategy, proper management and logistical capacity. The increasing number of asylum seekers found Romania somewhat unprepared to receive them, not to mention the arduous task of integrating them. On the other hand, Romania also faces a societal crisis, as 1 in every 5 adult Romanian citizens fit for work emigrated from the country. Romania is becoming the holder of a negative record within the EU: being the Member State with the highest number of emigrants within the European Community. Naturally, this will have serious repercussions in the future concerning the sustainability, employment and economic development of the country. Thus, Romania faces a double dilemma: first, its citizens emigrated to other countries in search of a better life due to the lack of adequate conditions back at home (thus the country experiences an acute lack of manpower, plus it is facing the challenges associated with the ageing of the population); secondly, under EU law it committed itself to take in and properly integrate third country nationals in need of international protection.

## 1. Methodology

The main aim of this research is to evaluate the role played by Romania in the current refugee stalemate, with the main purpose of assessing the possibility of successfully integrating asylum seekers within the Romanian society. In order to reach this objective, a predominantly quantitative analysis and the method of process tracing is applied.

In the first instance, the quantitative analysis of the data provided by European and national entities shall confer a genuine image of the Romanian migration picture, both with its immigration and emigration component. Thereby, detailed information shall be provided of the number of people who have emigrated and the third country nationals who came and those who lodged an asylum claim in the country. On the other hand, within the study secondary sources were also analysed, using qualitative methods as well. Knowing both the position of the political elite and of the Romanian citizens is also imperative for achieving the set target, as it has been identified the existence of a causal link between the level of efficiency of the reception/integration process, the stance of the decision-makers and the support of the average citizens. In order to reveal the attitude of the citizens, the method of process tracing was used, undertaking a sequential analysis of the evolution of the perception of citizens, corroborating the presumption according to which, the view of the people was partially influenced by the official stance of the political elite, by the framing of the media and mainly by their own mentality, culture, level of education, self-induced preconceptions and misleading stereotypes. Finally, the examination of the existent logistical capabilities provided the last impetus needed for the final assessment: namely to appreciate the integrative ability of the Romanian society. Even though, Hartmut Esser's *sociological integration theory* provided the theoretical backbone, the study intends to be a less theoretical but a more practical, exploratory investigation.

## 2. Romania, a Country of Emigrants: the Romanian Exodus

As highlighted in the previous part, Romania's migration profile shows a negative trend, especially when it comes to emigration. Since its accession to the European

Union in 2007 and the opening of the Western European labour markets, millions of Romanians have decided to leave behind their country of origin, stating mainly political (the level of corruption and the quality of the political elite) and economic (the lack of possibilities, the existent conditions, low wages) reasons for their choice. The data provided by the Eurostat reveals that in 2007, 7.4% of the Romanian citizens of working age between 20 and 64 were living in another EU Member State. By 2012 this number almost doubled, increasing to 13.6%, while in 2017 Romania became the negative record setter, turning into the country with the highest number of emigrants within the European Union. It was estimated that around 19.7% of the adult population physically fit for work (1 in 5 people) left the country, migrating into another EU Member State. For Romania, in the 2007–2017 decade it signified an increase by 12.3%. In this trend, Romania was followed by Lithuania with 15%, Croatia with 14% and Portugal with 13.9%. On the other hand, in 2017 only 1% of the German, 1.1% of the British and 1.3 % of the Swedish and French citizens were living in another Member State (Eurostat 87/2018: 4).

According to the press release from the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 2018 issued by the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, the resident population of the country on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2018 was 19.524.000 inhabitants, registering a decrease by 120.7 thousand of people compared to the previous year 2017. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2017 the resident population was 19.638.000, registering by 122.000 less people than in the previous year, 2016. The balance of international migration was negative, minus 76.209 people.

As the report reveals, on the one hand, the negative natural growth is to be held accountable for the phenomenon, as the mortality rate exceeded that of the birth rates, with the number of deaths being larger than the number of births by 71.125. On the other hand, the long-term temporary international migration balance was continuously negative with 53.381 citizens leaving the country since the previous reporting year. By this communication, the Romanian National Institute of Statistics does nothing but further confirm the perseverance of the declining pattern initiated in the country a few years ago, namely that Romania continues to be a country of emigration, the phenomenon of emigration being the second biggest cause of the country's population decline. Concerning the gender balance, more male citizens (50.9%) emigrated from the country in 2017 than females (Institutul Național de Statistică 2018: 1–2). Furthermore, just like in the vast majority of the other EU countries, in Romania also, the population is ageing, in 2018 reaching a ratio of 116.9 elderly to 100 young persons over 15, the gap between the elderly population aged 65 and over and the young population 0–14 years reaching 513.000 persons (3.551 thousand compared to 3.038 thousand persons), increasing compared to the 439.000 persons on 1 January 2017) (Ibidem).

The World Migration Report of the International Organization for Migration for 2018 also confirmed that in 2016 approximately 3 million Romanian citizens were residing in another EU or European Free Trade Association state, turning into the country with the highest number of emigrants within the EU. Besides providing accurate statistical data, the IOM goes even further by forecasting a rather gloomy future for Romania in terms of population movement, stating that if the current trend (emigration being higher than immigration) continues also in the following years, by 2050 Romania will experience severe population decline, which undoubtedly will negatively influence the country's long term economic development and productivity (World Migration Report 2018: 72–73).

Based on the data gathered by the Social Monitor commissioned by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung association, on the 11<sup>th</sup> February 2018, 2,578,540 Romanian citizens were gone abroad for more than a year, 11.6% of the entire population residing in another country in 2017. Looking at the share of people leaving the country by region, we face the fact that out of the existent 8 development regions, the percentage of emigration is the highest in the North Eastern and South Eastern Region, by 17.7%, respectively 14.4% (Monitor Social 2018).

Accordingly, this foregoing quantitative analysis served multiple purposes:

- To familiarize the reader with Romania's emigration profile revealing the current state of affairs in terms of movement of people;
- To prepare the ground for the comparative cross examination concerning the immigration of third country nationals to Romania;
- To assist in reaching the overall objective of the study, namely to assess the possibility of integrating refugees in Romania.

### **3. The Other Side of the Coin: Immigration to Romania**

The country's migration profile is not complete until we examine the movement of third country nationals to Romania, mainly emphasizing the asylum applications of non-EU citizens, as the article focuses on the possibility of integrating refugees into the Romanian society. However, at the same time we must not forget to briefly assess the number of third country nationals legally residing in Romania, as together with the analysis of the phenomenon of emigration and of asylum seeking, we shall get a holistic picture concerning the migratory landscape of the country.

Pursuant to the information published by the Romanian General Inspectorate for Immigration in February 2019, throughout 2018<sup>1</sup> there were 15.284 visa applications submitted by foreigners at the Romanian diplomatic missions abroad, 10.741 of which were approved while 1530 were rejected. There were 10.527 work permits issued<sup>2</sup>, 69.8% for permanent workers and 26.8% for detached workers. In 2018, 120.358 foreign citizens were legally residing in the country, 69.141<sup>3</sup> of whom came from third countries<sup>4</sup> (with legal residence) and 51.217<sup>5</sup> originated from the EU/EEA/Switzerland<sup>6</sup> (Romanian General Inspectorate for Immigration Report 2017, 2018). As a consequence of mass emigration from the country, both in the white and the blue collar sectors there are serious shortages in skilled and also unskilled workers, especially in the fields of agriculture, service and construction. These sectors try to substitute the missing manpower with workers from outside the European Community, such as Vietnam and the Philippines etc.<sup>7</sup> (Libertatea 2018). This information is of a major importance, as it could serve as an incentive for third country nationals to immigrate to Romania, furthermore we do not exclude the possibility that in the near future these job shortages could be filled by the incoming refugees.

Concerning asylum applications, during 2018 the Inspectorate General for Immigration documented 2138 requests, a number which compared to the previous year is smaller (4820<sup>8</sup>), but overall, lately in the number of asylum applications an upward multiannual trend was registered in the country. Charts no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 were prepared using the data provided by Eurostat and the Romanian Inspectorate

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017 there were 11.535 visa applications delivered with a favourable opinion, and 1435 with a negative opinion. Total number of 16.103 visa applications.

<sup>2</sup> In 2017 were issued only 4871 work permits.

<sup>3</sup> 35.4% were having family members in Romania, 22.8% came for studies, and 17.8% had permanent stay.

<sup>4</sup> Mainly from the Republic of Moldova, Turkey, China, Syria, Israel etc.

<sup>5</sup> 40.2% were workers, 14.6% students, 27.4% had means of subsistence.

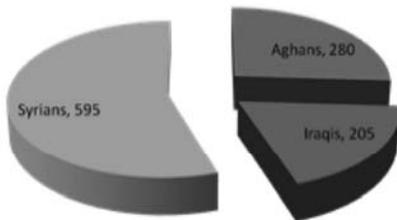
<sup>6</sup> Mainly from Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary etc.

<sup>7</sup> By 2018, approximately 1500 people arrived from Vietnam.

<sup>8</sup> This 161% increase compared to 2016 is due to the rising number of asylum applications submitted by third country nationals who have entered the country irregularly at the border with Serbia. The vast majority of asylum claims (3198) were lodged at the Centre from Timisoara, this seriously exceeding the accommodating capacity of the facility. In order to prevent the overcrowding of the centre, the authorities had decided to transfer the asylum seekers to the other existent facilities, undertaking 104 transfer operations.

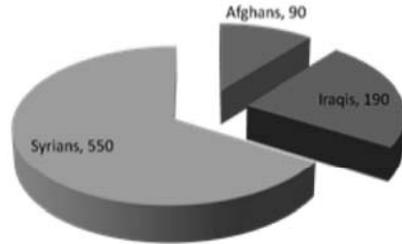
General for Immigration, reflecting the rising trend in asylum applications and for some forms of international protection submitted in Romania in the past 5 years.

**Chart 1: First time asylum applications in Romania 2014. Top three applicants**



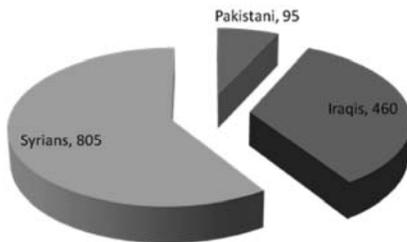
Total Romania: 1500; 0,3%of EU  
 Total EU28: 561 625  
 Source: Eurostat, 2014.

**Chart 2: First time asylum applications in Romania 2015. Top three applicants**



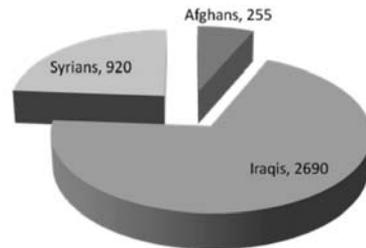
Total Romania: 1225; 0,1%of EU  
 Total EU28: 1 225 640  
 Source: Eurostat, 2015.

**Chart 3: First time asylum applications in Romania 2016. Top three applicants**



Total Romania: 1855; 0,2% of EU  
 Total EU28: 1 204 280  
 Source: Eurostat, 2016.

**Chart 4: First time asylum applications in Romania 2017. Top three applicants**

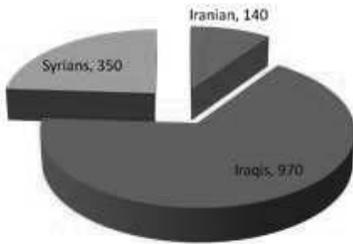


Total Romania: 4700; 0,7% of EU  
 Total EU28: 1 225 640  
 Source: Eurostat, 2017.

Chart no. 7 validates the growing trend in terms of asylum applications submitted in the country by foreign citizens, which indeed compared to the EU average is low, but contrasted with the statistics from a decade ago clearly shows a continuously rising number at domestic level. Thus, we may conclude that the international migratory movements (triggered by the Arab Spring, the Libyan, Iraqi and the Syrian crisis etc.)

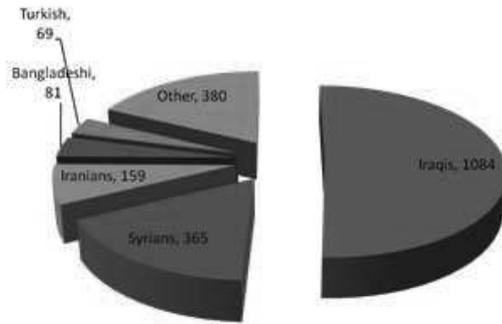
from the past decade influenced also Romania, increasing the detections of irregular entries and stays, and also the number of asylum applications.

**Chart 5: First time asylum applications in Romania 2016. Top three applicants**



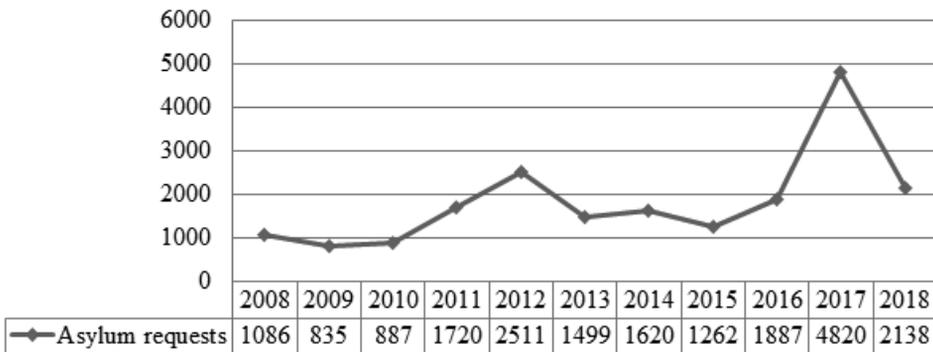
Total Romania: 1945; 0,3% of EU  
 Total EU28: 580 845  
 Source: Eurostat, 2018.

**Chart 6: First time asylum applications in Romania 2017. Top applicants**



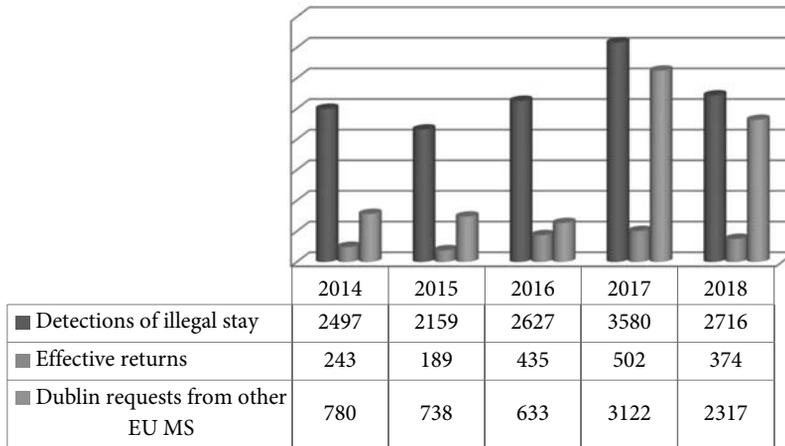
Total Romania: 2138  
 Source: Inspectorate General for Immigration, 2018.

**Chart 7: Asylum applications submitted in Romania 2008–2018**



Source: Own elaboration based on the data found at Inspectorate General for Immigration 2017, 2018.

**Chart 8: Achievements in the field of migration Romania  
Inspectorate General for Immigration 2014–2018**



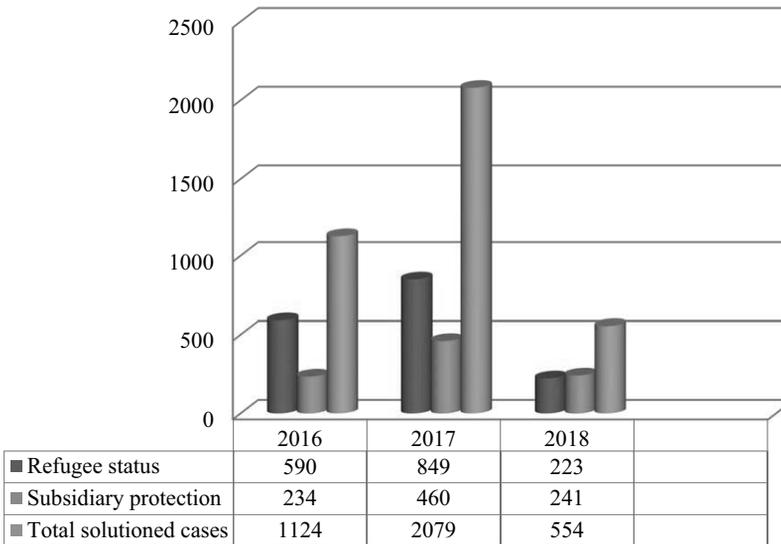
Source: Own elaboration based on the data found at Inspectorate General for Immigration 2017, 2018.

Concerning asylum grants, in 2017 (Inspectorate General for Immigration 2017, 2018):

- 2 079 applications for international protection have been settled;
- a form of protection was granted in 1.309 cases;
- 849 third country nationals got a refugee status;
- 460 were granted subsidiary protection;
- support for 101 immigrants repatriated under the Assisted Voluntary Repatriation Program (main countries: Iraq, Philippines, Iran);
- under the intra-EU Relocation Scheme there were 174 TCNs resettled (172 from Greece and 2 from Italy);
- under the extra-EU relocation scheme there were 43 refugees from Turkey resettled;
- asylum approval rate was 63%.

While in 2018 the Inspectorate registered:

- 106 migrants who were assisted for voluntary repatriation;
- 223 received refugee status;
- 241 got subsidiary protection;
- 83.75% approval rate of asylum/international protection requests.

**Chart 9: Asylum in Romania 2016–2018**

Own elaboration based on the data found at Inspectorate General for Immigration 2017, 2018.

## 4. The Refugee Crisis and the Official Stance of the Romanian Political Elite

When the so called ‘migratory crisis’ debuted in 2015 and more than 1 million refugees/immigrants came to Europe from Africa and the Middle East, the Romanian authorities found themselves facing a major challenge: how to welcome and accommodate a large number of asylum seekers if Romania has never been a major destination country for immigrants and it is not adequately prepared from an administrative and logistical point of view (Costea 2016: 5).

Among the first steps taken by the central administration in this regard, we find the elaboration of a coherent National Immigration Strategy for the period 2015–2018 highlighting the need for a more flexible admission system and for an enhanced attention to third country nationals that might pose a threat to national security (Sebe 2016: 14). However, we consider that the motto of the strategy is meaningful and it already illustrates the official position of the central leadership, as according

to the strategy “migration is a process that needs to be managed, not a problem to be solved” (National Immigration Strategy for the period 2015–2018, 2015). The strategy also discloses the number of refugees (out of the 160.000 it was initially 1785) that Romania was supposed to take in initially. According to the two relocation schemes proposed by the European Commission through the implementation package of the European Migration Agenda, a total of 2.362 persons were foreseen for Romania, out of which 1.705 through the emergency relocation mechanism (682 from Greece and 1.023 from Italy) and 657 through the extra-EU resettlement program with Turkey. From the wording used within the document it is more than clear, that Romania was aligned with those EU Member States which were willing to show solidarity and to take in peoples in peril, and to “[...] participate in the joint efforts of the Member States to reduce the pressure of illegal migration” (Ibidem).

Nevertheless, even if within the National Strategy of Immigration the government officially accepted the quota imposed by the EU and committed itself to welcome and integrate the refugees, prior to the elaboration of the strategy within political circles there were heated debates concerning the level of solidarity that the country was supposed to show and the number of immigrants that it was about to take. The *responsibility frame* and the number of refugees under the mandatory relocation quota dominated the discussions on online media platforms and made the headlines of the vast majority of the written and online media in the country in this period (Corb, Buturoiu and Durach 2017: 8).

The former president of the country, Traian Băsescu, current leader of the Popular Movement Party and recently elected MEP to the European Parliament had one of the most outspoken attitudes against the mandatory quotas and welcoming refugees in general, pledging that if he had remained president, Romania would not have taken even one immigrant, as they pose security risks to the country. Furthermore, several times during interviews and discourses he expressed a clear aversion towards Muslim immigrants. Regarding the subject of refugees and the situation of Muslims in general, Traian Băsescu has positioned himself on the «market» of politics to attract extreme right-wing voters. In July 2015, in the context of public debate on the construction of a large mosque in Bucharest, the former president said that «such decisions are foolish, if not anti-national». According to him “We have a minority of 60–70.000 Muslims, we have mosques in Constanta, but to make the largest mosque in Europe and bring 6.000 Muslim students [...] There is no greater risk than bringing Muslim students to the country» (Răileanu et al. 2015: 50). In September 2015, he expressed Islamophobic views when he pointed out that the arrival of Muslim immigrants will lead to the Islamization of Europe: “I’m thinking about the problem

in terms of national security. Let's not forget that these people are Sunni, Shiite, who put bombs on each other in their country [...] Why do we have to Islamize Europe? We should destroy the boats and vessels right at the pier. Immigration will increase, otherwise, each year, it will triple from year to year"(Ibidem). For his statements, the former president was even sanctioned by the National Council for Fighting Discrimination.

As it was previously mentioned, at the beginning, the negotiations concerning the level of solidarity and the number of the received refugees were subject to heated debates. We must acknowledge that when the Commission proposed the mandatory relocation scheme for the first time, the position of Romania was not totally transparent and receptive, however, willy-nilly in the end the president accepted the initially proposed 1785 refugees. However, later on the Commission wanted to increase this number to 2475, provoking serious backlash against the EU's supranational institutions, a backlash that had culminated in Romania's negative vote within the Justice and Home Affairs Council, voting against the mandatory relocation scheme alongside Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Iacob et al. 2016: 21). The former Prime Minister, Victor Ponta and former Minister for Home Affairs, Gabriel Oprea<sup>9</sup> were on the same wavelength with the president of the country, Klaus Iohannis, who, on the one hand, assured the EU decision-makers of Romania's solidarity (though this was conditional solidarity), but on the other hand, highlighted the country's incapacity to "integrate these refugees into society" (Sebe 2016: 10). As we can see, in case of Romania from the outset the debate was not about not wanting to accept asylum seekers, it was about the doubt whether it was able to, i.e. it was a matter of capability. Finally, because within the JHA Council there's no unanimous voting, the quota was accepted by the majority of the Member States and Romania was obliged to receive 2475 (this was later increased to 6351) persons in need of international protection, a request that later was honoured by the president, contrary to the initial aversion towards the mandatory relocation scheme. Furthermore, in 2016, the Romanian president saluted the deal with Turkey, also

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<sup>9</sup> "In the context of Romania being a safe country, doing its duty with great professionalism, I will go to this JHA tomorrow. I have a very clear mandate from President Klaus Iohannis and Premier Victor Ponta, that I will express modestly and with dignity there, that Romania respects its initial commitments to receive 1.785 immigrants, and that is the ability at the moment to the Romanian state. Of course, we will vote against binding quotas, "Gabriel Oprea".

supporting the measures taken to help Turkey<sup>10</sup> in the context of the refugee crisis (Iacob et al. 2016: 21, 23). Already since 2015, immigrants were testing a new migratory route through the Black Sea raising the possibility of turning Romania into a major transit country, just like Greece, Hungary or Austria etc. (Frontex, Migratory Map 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). When asked about the possibility of Romania turning into a major country of transit through the Black Sea, the president did not give much credit to this scenario, according to him: “As for a possible migratory route from Turkey on the Black Sea to Romania, I do not believe in such a route for two reasons. One the one hand, Turkey is very well in control of that area and once it is committed to detaining migrants we have no reason to question this matter. Two: The Black Sea cannot be approached on small boats, can only be crossed by fairly serious boats, or they will be immediately seen and therefore I do not think it will open such a route” (Iacob et al. 2016: 23). His forecast has come true, as since 2017<sup>11</sup> nobody came via this route, the Black Sea turning out to be more dangerous than the Mediterranean.

In conclusion to this section, we can state that since the debut of the crisis, the authorities are working hard to adjust both the legal and the logistical capacities of the country in order to properly receive and accommodate the asylum seekers, but their integration is another matter, it is a lengthy process, it takes time and patience from both parts. Thereby, in the upcoming parts we shall inspect the level of efficiency of the integration process into the Romanian society.

## 5. The perception of Romanian Citizens about Immigrants and Refugees

As underlined in the introduction, the main rationale for the elaboration of this predominantly quantitative study is the assessment of the possibility of welcoming and successfully integrating asylum seekers and refugees into the Romanian society. Accordingly, it is indispensable to get acquainted with all the pieces of the puzzle, namely to ‘gain *connaissance*’ of both the perception of the political elite and of the civil society in this matter. How the decision-makers react to this phenomenon and what kind of a position they adopt from the start could make a difference between a

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<sup>10</sup> In case of relocation from Turkey he accepted the quota, but continuously highlighted the importance of the voluntary nature of commitments for the relocation process.

<sup>11</sup> In 2017 there were 537 detections of illegal border crossing through the Black Sea route.

faulty and a propitious management of the situation. It is enough if we look at some politicians from Central and Southern Europe (Orbán Viktor, Robert Fico, Matteo Salvini, Mateusz Morawiecki etc.), who from the very beginning were reluctant to the idea of welcoming or taking in refugees and asylum seekers, and who were for adopting a zero tolerance and zero immigration policy, securitizing migration and building walls and barriers in order to keep TCNs out. By the repetition of an anti-immigrant rhetoric and the launch of a securitization call, nurturing the anxiety and the threat perception of the citizens, these leaders finally achieved their purpose: depicted asylum seekers as *personae non grata*, *criminals*, *terrorists*, *job thieves*, *welfare benefit seekers*, *Muslim invaders* etc. and kept them out of their countries. Ultimately, we must not forget that the legitimacy was given by the citizens, who believed in the securitizing discourse of the ruling class. Thus, in these countries the successful reception and integration of asylum seekers is rather difficult. Hence, there seems to be a correlation between the position taken by the political elite, the perception of the citizens and the success of the reception and integration process. Of course, regardless of the official stance of the authorities, the opinion of the people may differ. Such divergence of views could be the result of a lack of proper knowledge in respect to foreigners, their culture, religion, customs, way of life etc. Existing stereotypes, social prejudices, the mentality of the citizens could also act as barriers, preventing the citizens from building bridges which could connect them with these asylum seekers. A certain level of education, access to information, proper framing by the media and at the same time the willingness to find out more and veritable information are required in order to form a genuine image of these people in need of protection.

Quantitative analysis shall be carried out in order to gauge the opinion of the Romanian citizens about immigrants and refugees in general from the beginning<sup>12</sup> of the so called 'refugee crisis' until the present. Depending on the type of survey or questionnaire and the commissioned party there could be observed slight differences between the responses, but the overall message transmitted by them is that the vast majority of the Romanian citizens do not want refugees in the country, namely they do not want to coexist with asylum seekers/refugees.

At the beginning of the refugee crisis, one of the most read newspapers in the country, *Gândul*, launched an online poll, asking the citizens whether Romania should receive refugees or not. An overwhelming majority, 73.65% of the respondents (11.346 persons) expressed their negative view in respect of accepting refugees in

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<sup>12</sup> Before 2015 it was not really a public debate issue.

the country, also clearly refusing the mandatory relocation quota imposed by the European Union (Gândul 2015).

Another poll initiated in the same year by one of the most important media trusts in the country, Digi24 got a similar result as the previous survey, 51% of the interviewed stating that they disagree with the possibility of refugees living in Romania (Romanian National Council for Refugees/British Council 2018: 6).

One of the most accurate surveys<sup>13</sup> was carried out by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy in August 2015, on request of Digi24, using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing method on 1482 subjects over 18 years. According to the results, 83% of those interviewed have heard about the refugee crisis, 51% identifying war, while 46% poverty as the main reasons for the inflow of immigrants. 67% of those who have heard about this turmoil held accountable the governments of the countries of origin of these immigrants, and 54% blamed the DAESH terrorist organization for these migratory movements. Surprisingly, the respondents ranked Romania third in the line of the most affected countries by the migration crisis with 23%, just a little behind Germany (55%) and France (23%). On the other hand, 42% believed that there is a low risk for Romania to be exposed to an invasion of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa. When asked about the level of preparedness of the country in case of an influx the responses were overwhelmingly negative, 38% of the interviewees saying that they think that Romania is poorly prepared, while 35% underlined that it is even worse, as it is very inadequately prepared. In regards to the management of the 'crisis', the most trusted national organ was the army, followed<sup>14</sup> by the Gendarmerie, the Romanian Intelligence Service and the Romanian Border Police. Concerning the management of the migration stalemate in case of the European Union, the opinion was a bit more favourable, but overall just 39% of the respondents expressed a partial assent. Half of those surveyed, strongly agreed with the statement according to which the risk a terrorist threat from DAESH was increasing with the arrival of immigrants. 35% of the interviewees expressed total discord concerning the transformation of Romania into a transit country, while 26% totally agreed with this scenario. What is precious information for the future reception and integration of refugees and asylum seekers is that 32% totally, while 33% only partially agreed that Romania should receive a certain number of immigrants. It is however ambiguous, that while more than 60% would agree to

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<sup>13</sup> Maximum tolerated errors +- 2.6%.

<sup>14</sup> In the rank of preferences.

receiving immigrants on the country level, 42% would not want to receive them in their residential areas (IRES 2015).

According to the National Institute for Statistics in 2015, 56.3% of the respondents were against receiving refugees in the country, this percentage increasing to 84.6% in 2016. Furthermore, several studies were launched also at the level of city halls, with the same final result as at national level<sup>15</sup>. Surveys were conducted by the representatives of the civil society/NGOs as well, in order to evaluate the public perception of the refugee stalemate. The poll conducted on 768 persons by an NGO, Pro-Democratia in 2016 had mainly the same outcome, 55% of those questioned said that Romania should not host refugees (Romanian National Council for Refugees/British Council 2018: 6–7).

In 2018<sup>16</sup>, the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy carried out a survey on 1300 adults, inquiring about the level of discrimination in Romania and the current perceptions of hate crimes. The results of the poll are of an utmost importance, as they reveal the viewpoint of the citizens, 3 years after the debut of the migration emergency. We could consider the result partially as a reflection of the success of government policies, and of the framing used by the media to label the phenomenon. When asked how much trust they have in foreigners/immigrants, 38% responded that they have little trust, while 31% answered that they don't trust them at all, 68% highlighting the lack of trust in respect of Muslims. On the other hand, 61% would accept an immigrant as their relative, 70% as a friend, 77% as their co-worker, 84% to live in the same city/town/village. In case of Muslims the situation is similar, with 61, 72, 81, 87 percentage. 36% of the respondents agreed with the following statement: "in general Muslims could be considered dangerous" [...], while 44% believed that immigrants must be stopped at the external borders of Europe (IRES 2018).

As we could see from these results, the Romanian society is rather polarized in respect of immigrants, but unfortunately the vast majority tend to refuse to welcome or to coexist with foreigners. This shows that more progress is needed in inclusion policies and a more focused approach from the competent authorities.

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<sup>15</sup> See poll conducted at the level of the Bucharest City Hall in 2016: 66.1% of respondents said that they do not give their assent for refugees coming to the country and to live in their residential areas.

<sup>16</sup> Surveying period 26 November – 10 December 2018.

## 6. The Inclusion Capacity of the Romanian Regional Centres of Procedures and Accommodation for Asylum Seekers

In order to objectively evaluate the prospect of welcoming and integrating refugees, it is imperative to examine the logistical and administrative capacities of the Inspectorate General for Immigration being under the subordination of the Romanian Ministry of Home Affairs. From the official notification sent by the Inspectorate General to the Romanian Ombudsman in March 2018, it appears that currently in Romania there are 6 Regional centres of procedures and accommodation for asylum seekers at Timișoara (50), Șomcuta Mare (100 places), Rădăuți (130), Galați (200 places), Giurgiu (100) and București (320 places). As the number of asylum seekers is continuously growing and already exceeds the existing capacity (900 places) of the centres, the Inspectorate General started a project to augment the number of the existent beds by 100 in Timișoara, 100 in Rădăuți and 300 in Galați. Furthermore, the takeover and transformation of a property into a regional centre in Crevedia, Dâmbovița county has also started. The centre is due to be operational in two years with a capacity to accommodate 500 refugees (Letter of Inspectorate General to the Romanian Ombudsman 2018). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Development aims to launch a government program and strategy to rebuild some derelict buildings and to erect new homes for people with a certain form of protection. The money needed for this project will be secured from the Romanian state budget and from European funds<sup>17</sup>. Beside the spaces designated for the accommodation of third country nationals, the centres also have specially equipped rooms for health, recreational, sportive and educational purposes. Furthermore, in emergency situations the Inspectorate foresees the possibility to extend the number of the existent places: by 52 in București, by 10 in Galați, by 20 in Rădăuți, by 100 in Șomcuta Mare, by 10 in Timișoara and by 70 in Giurgiu, thus having the full accommodating capacity reach 1.162 places.

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<sup>17</sup> EU Funds such as AMIF (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund).

**Figure 1. The map of Romania with the location of the 6 receptions centres for asylum seekers and refugees**



Source: Own elaboration using Google maps.

Law no. 122/2006 on asylum in Romania and its subsequent modifications and completions determine the legal regime of aliens who request a form of protection in Romania, the legal regime of foreign beneficiaries of a form of protection in Romania, the procedure for granting, terminating and cancelling a form of protection in Romania, as well as the procedure for establishing the responsible Member State with the analysis of the asylum application (Law no. 122/2006).

According to this regulation, asylum seekers in Romania benefit of the following assistance (Law no. 122/2006):

- Free accommodation, on request in one of the 6 receptions centres of the Inspectorate General. During their housing, the Inspectorate is responsible for providing them all the necessary personal hygiene and cleaning products, and all the material goods needed for the preparation and serving of the daily meals;
- In case if they cannot provide for themselves, every asylum seeker is entitled to a daily allowance of 10 Ron for food, 100 Ron for clothing in the cold season and

67 Ron in the hot season, plus a maximum of 6 Ron/ person/day for other types of expenditures;

- Access to the labour market, according to the national legislation in vigour, 3 months after the date of lodging the asylum claim (if there hasn't been issued a negative opinion concerning the request);
- Free primary health/emergency hospital care, and free treatment in case of chronic and acute diseases;
- The underage asylum seekers prior to their mandatory enrolment in school, have to participate in Romanian language courses for a year;
- Can participate at various activities targeting cultural adaptation and on request can benefit from counselling and psychological assistance free of charge.

Complementary to the facilities provided by the Romanian government, asylum seekers and the persons who acquired a form of protection are also assisted through projects financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. In this assistance plan the civil society and various NGOs play a crucial part, as through a well-established consultancy scheme, they are allowed to contribute to the establishment of objectives and initiatives for a better integration of third country nationals through projects financed by AMIF (Letter of Inspectorate General to the Romanian Ombudsman, 2018). As disclosed in the document C (2017)5626 of the decision of the European Commission to implement Romania's National Program of Support from the Fund for Migration, Asylum and Integration, the maximum contribution from AMIF in the 2014–2020 budgetary period is 53.343.047 Euros. Out of this sum 25.080.000 Euros are foreseen for the costs related to the transfer of applicants for international protection from Greece and Italy, according to 10<sup>th</sup> article of the Council Decision (EU) 2015/1523 and of Council Decision (EU) 2016/1601 (C2017/5626, 2017).

In conclusion to this part, we could assert that when it comes to welcoming and accommodating third country nationals benefitting from a certain form of protection, the Romanian Inspectorate General for Immigration encounters some logistical and administrative difficulties. The lack accommodation is one of the major hold-ups, hardening the housing of refugees; while on the other hand, the budgetary constraints also constitute serious setbacks. In reality, the financial assistance given to refugees is a mirror, reflecting the level of socio-economic development of the country. Indeed, the level of services offered to asylum seekers is precarious, but it is appropriate to the low wages and social benefits that the Romanian citizens also enjoy. We could label these, as major obstacles which stay in the way of a successful reception. Otherwise, we stress that this transient impasse can be overcome with

a more focused strategic approach from the competent national authorities. As we have seen, steps were already taken in this direction: such as the supplementation of the existent places, the takeover of properties and derelict buildings and their transformation into new reception centres etc. Furthermore, the asylum seekers can also benefit from other projects, funded by the EU (like AMIF), Frontex, EASO, the Norwegian Financial Mechanism, the Development Bank of the Council of Europe (Financial Assistance from the Fund for Migrants and Refugees) or by international and national NGOs etc. These act as compensatory measures for the low financial assistance provided by the Romanian government.

## 7. The prospect of Integrating Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Romania

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines the verb to integrate as the action “to mix with and join society or a group of people, often changing to suit their way of life, habits, and customs” (Cambridge English Dictionary 2019). While Merriam-Webster describes the noun integration as “the act or process or an instance of integrating: such as incorporation as equals into society or an organization of individuals of different groups (such as races); coordination of mental processes into a normal effective personality or with the environment” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2019).

As integration is a process that needs to be addressed also from a theoretical point of view, we have chosen Hartmut Esser’s *sociological integration theory*, a paradigm successfully implemented (but also criticized) by various scholars examining the integration of immigrants into the German society. Esser proposed a conceptual clarification of the *concept of integration* on the basis of relevant sociological theories and concepts, defining integration as the cohesion of parts in a “systemic” whole, regardless of what this cohesion is based on. The units/pieces must be an indispensable part of what one might call an “integral” part of the whole. According to Esser, due to the existent cohesion between the parts, the system will delimit itself from a specific “environment” and will become identifiable as a self-standing system within this milieu. In order to illustrate even more the particularities of integration, Esser presents its opposite process, the *segmentation*, in which the pieces are juxtaposed, being unable to form an identifiable self-standing system within the existent environment. Accordingly, integration implies the presence of a certain degree of interdependence between the units of the system. Thus, interdependence is being used as a specific

feature of demarcation from the respective environment. Depending on the level of interdependence, the system can be more or less integrated, and because of this interconnectedness the behaviour of one unit could affect the system as a whole and the other pieces of the puzzle. This statement is also valid in case of social systems/societies. In this regard, Esser gives the example of a neighbourhood, arguing that neighbourhoods form integrated social systems if the families living in it know each other, and interact with each other i.e. there are various types of interactions amongst them (social, cultural, economic, linguistic, educational etc.). On the contrary, neighbourhoods become non-integrated or segmented if the communities/families only share the common space of the neighbourhood but nothing else, the amount of interactions amongst them being limited or almost non-existent. Namely they only co-exist, but do not collaborate or interact with each other (Esser 2001: 1–3). According to Esser's main tenet, there are 4 preconditions of a successful systemic and social integration: *culturation*<sup>18</sup> (cultural integration), *positioning*, *interaction* and *identification*. *Culturation* means the acquisition of the culture and the learning of the state language, while *positioning* signifies the earning of a certain position<sup>19</sup> within society; *interaction* means the establishment of contacts of all kinds with the host society, while *identification* presumes the development of an emotional bond with the receiving society (Ibidem: 8–12).

Moreover, Esser's theory is insightful, acknowledging the fact that a successful integration is always the result of reciprocal efforts taken by both the host society and the newcomer migrant populations. On the other hand, even though he upholds the importance of mutual efforts, he stresses that the primary responsibility to dissolve ethnic differences belongs to the immigrants and not to the host society, thus generating debates within the scholarly world concerning the problem of assimilation. He describes assimilation as the vanishing of systematic differences and not as a one-sided adaptation to the host society, distinguishing 5 dimensions of it: the linguistic, the cultural, the economic, the spatial, the social and the emotional dimension of assimilation (Ibidem: 17–18). Nevertheless, Esser fails to take into account the negative connotations that the concept of assimilation might entail, as it could lead to the loss of the personal or cultural identity and of the 'self'.

After this theoretical briefing we shall see whether the 4 preconditions of successful integration could be implemented in the Romanian milieu.

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<sup>18</sup> From the German word *Kulturation*.

<sup>19</sup> By acquiring a job, education and status in the society.

According to the official national statistics, in 2016 and 2017 Romania relocated 728 refugees from Greece and Italy (554 in 2016 and 174 in 2017) plus an additional 43 persons under the extra-EU relocation scheme from Turkey in 2017 (Letter of Inspectorate General to the Romanian Ombudsman, 2018). In Decision No. 40 for the completion of the Government Decision No. 1.596/2008 on the resettlement of refugees in Romania published in the Official Gazette no 133 on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2018, Romania committed to accept a number of 109 refugees in need of resettlement, and 80 persons from Turkey in the period 2018–2019 (Inspectorate General for Immigration 2018).

As shown in the data submitted by the Inspectorate General in January 2018, on September 30, 2017, IGI's records included 1103 persons with a form of protection who opted for joining the integration program carried out between 30.09.2016 – 30.09.2017. Ranking countries of origin are: Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Palestinian stateless persons, Somalia, Yemen, Iran Pakistan, Egypt, Central African Republic, Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Libya, Armenia, Bosnia, Georgia, Ukraine and the Congo (Witec and Berbec 2018: 4–15).

Within the integration program are offered three types of activities:

1. Romanian language learning courses<sup>20</sup>;
2. Cultural accommodation sessions;
3. Sessions/counselling activities.

The Romanian language courses are organized by the General Inspectorate for Immigration through the collaboration with the Ministry of National Education through the school inspectorates and by the non-governmental organizations working in the field of asylum and integration of foreigners in Romania and carrying out annually certain projects funded by the Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration. The cultural orientation courses and the counselling sessions are supported by the integration officers and the specialized staff of the Regional Centres of the General Inspectorate for Immigration and by the NGOs<sup>21</sup> working in the field of asylum

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<sup>20</sup> The following categories of foreigners are granted access to Romanian language courses: asylum seekers, persons who have obtained a form of protection; foreign citizens with the right of residence on the territory of Romania.

<sup>21</sup> In Romania there are 14 Regional Integration Centres in the following cities: Timisoara, Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Baia Mare, Sibiu, Tirgu Mures, Bucharest, Craiova, Brasov, Pitesti, Iasi, Constanta, Galati and Vaslui. The main non-governmental organizations that currently operate in the integration of refugees are: the Ecumenical Association of Churches in Romania – AIDRom, the National Romanian Council for Refugees CNRR, the International Organization for Migration – Mission in Romania – IOM, the ICAR Foundation, the Jesuit Refugee Service – JRS and a few other local organisations.

and foreigners integration in Romania and carrying out funded projects previously mentioned (Ibidem).

The refugees participating in the integration programme will be granted: (Ibidem)

- Accommodation, upon request, in the centres of the General Inspectorate for Immigration, for the period of up to 12 months. To benefit from this service the refugees have to pay a monthly contribution toward the cost of utilities. Vulnerable people are exempted from this requirement, according to GO 44/2004;
- Romanian language courses;
- Cultural accommodation sessions;
- Material aid, for a period of two months;
- Social counselling which includes ensuring access to the rights they have in Romania: the right to employment, the right to housing, the right to health and social care, and the right to education;
- Counselling and psychological support;
- Material aid amounting to 540 Ron (120 EUR)/person for a period not exceeding 12 months, provided under the condition of an active participation in the integration programme;
- After completing the programme, refugees can apply for financial support to pay for accommodation outside the centre, settling up 50% of the accommodation costs for a period of one year.

In 2018, 508 people who have obtained a form of protection have applied to join the integration program, 1146 foreigners with a form of protection have benefited from integration programs (Inspectorate General for Immigration 2018).

In the following section<sup>22</sup>, we shall succinctly present the results of the Index of Integration of Immigrants in Romania report for the year 2017, as besides third country nationals it also reveals important data about the integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection. Of course, the results should not be considered exhaustive as they do not reveal information about all the categories of migrants with a special status from the country. Otherwise, it is rather difficult to keep track the trajectory of all the migrants<sup>23</sup> with a special status, once they have finished their integration programme.

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<sup>22</sup> This part represents entirely the results of report entitled Index of Integration of Immigrants in Romania 2017.

<sup>23</sup> They are a few visible cases as they were more mediatized: Mahmoud pastry cook at Giurgiu, 5 Syrians at a fast food restaurant in Cluj-Napoca, other 3 refugees from Syria hired by a factory in Cluj-Napoca etc.

*General context Migrant integration* (Index of Integration of Immigrants in Romania 2017: 20–21).

- In 2017 there were 66.850 immigrants (3924 BIP<sup>24</sup>s and 62.926 TCN<sup>25</sup>s), accounting for 0.34% of the Romanian population, an increase of 2.9% compared to 2016 (2903 BIP and 61 994 TCN);
- The number of beneficiaries of international protection increased by 35.2% in 2017 compared to 2016 and the number of third-country nationals increased by 0.15%;
- Most BIP immigrants originate from countries like Syria (58.18%), Iraq (20.57%), or Afghanistan (3.85%);
- Most third country nationals come from neighbouring countries, such as Moldova (16.24%), Ukraine (1.77%), Serbia (1.90%), or Turkey (14.24%);
- 89.07% of all immigrants (BIP and TCNs) are in the active population category (aged 15–64) compared to 61.17% of the total native population;
- Women account for only 39.75% of the total number of BIP and TCNs;
- 65.68% of the immigrants (BIP and TCNs) came to Romania in order to study and 8.63% to work as it is revealed;
- Romania is a relatively new destination country for immigrants. 48.29% of immigrants (BIP and TCN) have been living in Romania for less than one year, 25.98% for one to four years, and 25.72% for more than four years;
- 90.27% of immigrants (BIP and TCN) are established in urban areas, compared to 53.72% of the indigenous population;
- More than 60% of all immigrants (BIP and TCN) are residing in the biggest counties: Bucharest (33.8%), Ilfov (10.5%), Timiș (6.4%), Constanța (5.9%) and Cluj (4.2%);
- The average monthly income of an immigrant is 2.059 Ron, lower than the net average income in Romania (2.376 Ron);
- The native population has a higher social index than immigrants (Beneficiaries of International Protection, BIPs and Third Country Nationals, TCNs);
- More than 20% of immigrants (BIP and TCNs) declared that they are discriminated because of their immigrant status, because they have another race or ethnicity, or because of their knowledge of the Romanian language;

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<sup>24</sup> Beneficiaries of International Protection.

<sup>25</sup> Third Country Nationals.

- 44.8% complain about discrimination in relation to public transport companies, followed by the General Inspectorate for Immigration (42.9%) and educational units (40.6%).

*Education context* (Index of Integration of Immigrants in Romania 2017: 22)

- Approximately 80% of immigrants (BIP and TCN) declare that they are or have been involved in study programs taking place in Romania;
- Approximately 64.1% of immigrants (BIP and TCN) are following or undergoing a study program in the public education system and 13.3% are following or undergoing a private study program;
- Approximately 45% of immigrants (BIP and TCN) declared that they were part of university education programs in the country of origin before coming to Romania;
- Immigrants (BIP and TCN) are involved in education programs in Romania with 34% of them in the English language, followed by Romanian for 28% and by French for 3%;
- 316 BIP and TCN students were enrolled in the 2015–2016 school year. Of these, 10.76% were registered in the pre-school cycle, 31.02% in the primary cycle, 16.77% in the middle school and 38.93% in the high school cycle. Only 2.58% of pupils belonging to the BIP and TCN categories were registered in vocational education;
- In 2015–2016 school year, based on the data forwarded by the 27 county inspectorates, 19 students were enrolled in the capacity examination and 16 in the baccalaureate exam. 78.9% of them got passing grade over 5 at the capacity examination and 62.5% passed the baccalaureate exam.

*Languages and culture dimension* (Index of Integration of Immigrants in Romania 2017: 23)

- BIPs and TCNs speak English, Romanian, French and Arabic. Romanian was most often mentioned as a foreign language spoken by immigrants (BIPs and TCNs);
- Approximately 8% of immigrants (BIP and TCN) have 2 or more mother tongues;
- Within family mainly the mother tongue is used, while Romanian is the most used in dialogue with friends and at work;
- Approximately 25% of immigrants (BIP and TCN) consider that they have a relatively high level of knowledge about Romania's history and culture;
- More than 42% of immigrants (BIP and TCN) state that they attended courses offered free of charge by education institutions in Romania and 7.6% in courses offered free of charge by non-governmental organizations.

*Employment* (Index of Integration of Immigrants in Romania 2017: 25)

- About 70% of County Agencies for Employment have been reporting data on unemployed BIPs and TCNs;
- Approximately 13% of Territorial Labour Offices at county level reported data on the requested information, 87% of them mentioning that they do not have such data or that they do not have a special methodology to record in their systems the persons residing legally in Romania as BIPs and TCNs;
- County Agencies for Employment and Territorial Labour Offices do not collect and centralize data on the number of employees or the unemployed and their type for the immigrant category (BIPs and TCNs);
- what we can know from other sources is that most immigrants (BIPs and TCNs) have fixed-term contracts, only 39.2% benefit from indefinite work contracts;
- Immigrants (BIPs and TCNs) working in Romania tend to have a work program similar to the native population, working an average of 7.78 hours per day, with a value of 7.33 hours for those with contract for the specified period and 8.4 hours for those with indefinite contracts;
- 63.5% of immigrants (BIP and TCNs) work in the private sector, 10.6% in the non-governmental sector, and 25.9% in the public sector.

## Conclusions

At the beginning, we have specified that the main objective of this study is to analyse the role played by Romania in the current refugee crisis, with the purpose of assessing the possibility of successfully integrating asylum seekers into the Romanian society. Accordingly, we have explored the balance between the *pros* and the *cons* in this regard, observing where the balance will swing.

As *pro* arguments for an efficient integration, we have found an overall positive mindset at the level of the decision-makers (government and presidential bureau), who more or less are on the same wavelength in respect of receiving and integrating people in need of international protection. The following quotations genuinely reflect the current position of the political class, as in their opinion “is a shame to waste a good crisis”/ “we do not deal with a crisis, but with an opportunity to create a functional system for the integration of refugees, both on short term and for the

future” (Sebe 2016: 15). In our opinion, it is also praiseworthy the fact that contrary to the initial reluctance and the assumed gaps in the accommodating capacity, the country has lived up to its obligations and honoured the requirements under the mandatory relocation scheme. Even if there does not exist a full consensus between the Government and the Presidential Administration, there is willingness to try to manage the situation, “Romania wants to be part of the solution and not of the problem” (Ibidem: 17). We have seen that since the beginning of the migration surge proficient measures were taken for the augmentation of the existent places in the reception centres, furthermore the involvement of the civil society and NGOs in the integration process can be perceived as true added values. Unfortunately, on the other hand, the *cons* also abound as except from the logistical obstacles, we must acknowledge that the level of services offered to asylum seekers is precarious, similar to the low level of salaries and social benefits that Romanian citizens also enjoy. This reflects the level of socio-economic development of the country, and this is not something that changes from one night to the other. Furthermore, traditionally Romania has the profile of a transit and not of a destination country, and we must not forget that it is not in Schengen. Romania has a negative profile in terms of population movement, as more people emigrate than immigrate and the birth rates are declining as well. The presence of asylum seekers could be properly fructified, as on the long run they could fill in the gaps on the labour market, however, for this to happen, successful integration is needed, which is being made more difficult by other obstacles as well, such as the mentality, education, level of prejudice of the native population, the great majority of which refuse to coexist with immigrants. Additionally, it is rather difficult to assess the integration in Romania by using Esser’s four preconditions *culturation*, *positioning*, *interaction* and *identification*. Looking at the Index of Integration of Immigrants in the Romanian report, we can conclude that the integration of beneficiaries of international protection into the Romanian society is only a partial success and much more is needed in the future if the country is to be transformed into a genuine receiving and integrating environment.

As for the final say, we fully believe that for our country, admitting a greater number of refugees would be a long-term chance to compensate for the deficits that have arisen over the past decade through massive labour migration to Western Europe. At the same time however, Romania must create proper incentives to bring home those who have emigrated in search of a better life.

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