From Learners to Teachers: Human Capital Accumulation among Romanian Migrant Workers in the UK

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British immigration policies again drew the attention of European public opinion after January 1st 2007, when the UK government decided to keep its labour market closed to Bulgarian and Romanian workers. This decision stood in marked contrast to 2004, when the UK was one of only three EU Member States that fully opened its labour market to the citizens of the ten countries that joined the EU that year. Employing data collected through ethnographic interviews and participative observation, I will illustrate the concern for human capital accumulation that Romanian migrants who arrived before 2007 have shown, as they have worked to establish themselves in new jobs in a new country. When remitted, this capital can have a significant positive impact in the long term on Romania's future development.

This article is a follow up to a study examining the role that migration networks play in the process of human capital accumulation and remittance of Romanian migrant workers in the UK, which I conducted in 2007 as part of my studies at the National School for Political and Administrative Studies of Romania. Even though the study in its full length employed various types of data and analysis techniques, in this article I will focus on the main challenges that the migrants face, and how these challenges spurred their further accumulation of human capital. In order to describe these challenges, I relied on 23 in-depth ethnographic interviews which I conducted in March 2007 amongst the Romanian community in London. Official quantitative data offered by the UK Home Office and data from two studies conducted by the Open Society Foundation in Romania was used in order to identify the socio-demographic profile of the Romanian migrant worker in the UK and to identify possible links between the process of human capital accumulation and economic development in Romania.

10 miles from Heathrow: My aunt Adriana and her family

I arrived in London on the morning of March 3rd, 2007; it was a Saturday. My aunt and her 9-year-old son came to meet me and my mother at the airport. My aunt Adriana is 37 years old, and after working for eleven years in the Romanian healthcare system as a registered nurse, she obtained a work permit and a job as a carer in a hospital in London in 2005. A year later, her husband Mihai also came to the UK and found a job as a construction worker. Six months later, they went home to collect their 9-year-old son. Even though he was in third grade in Romania, the boy was now enrolled in the fifth grade at a local public school in London.

Adriana was different from how I remembered her. She wore white sport shoes, drove a car with the steering-wheel on the left, was concerned with whether she took the right exit or not, and prepared a microwave dinner. My relatives live very close to Heathrow Airport and it took us only twenty minutes to get home: a room in an apartment that occupied the ground floor of a Victorian style house. It looked much the same as the rest of the houses we had seen on our way from the airport. There were three rooms in the apartment, a T-shaped hallway, one bathroom and a kitchen with a back door exit towards the backyard, to which the residents have no legal access, according to the rental contract they had signed when moving in. This backyard is rented by "the British man" living upstairs, who used to be very tolerant and let my relatives use it as well, until he had to assist in the celebration of a traditional Romanian holiday on his backyard lawn. The smell of a Romanian-style barbecue, the loud music and the laughter lasting until 2am did not particularly enchant their neighbour. "The British man upstairs," in turn, is not particularly my uncle's favourite person, considering that his two

teenage grandsons can sometimes be caught smoking marijuana right in front of my uncle and aunt's kitchen door.

Eliza and Alexandru: Coping with British schools

The house is the property of an Indian family who came to London almost 20 years ago, but most of their neighbours are British or Irish. The three rooms in the ground floor apartment are shared by my relatives and another Romanian family. Their stories are similar: Adriana and Maria arrived in the UK at the same time; they were both nurses in Romania until they were recruited by a British company, which offered them a job as carers in the same hospital in London. Maria's husband also works in construction. Initially the employer provided them with accommodation, but when they decided to bring their families, they had to find their own housing. Their little daughter, Eliza, who is 6, was too young to go to school when they still lived in Romania. The only system she knows is the British one, which she likes very much, especially because "her friends are very colourful." Her best friend is from Morocco; her parents also came to the UK about three years ago.

Eliza's situation is very different from the one of my cousin, Alexandru. He is a little older and still has some problems integrating. He doesn't speak English very well and prefers to remain apart from the other children when he is in school. Furthermore, he isn't yet able to use the English mathematical lexicon, and his teacher often asks him to read stories during math classes. The professor has the obligation to mention this in his notebook, so the parents are aware of what has happened. The Monday before I visited, the teacher had written: "Due to noticeable high emotional stress, I had to ask Alex to go to the Reading Corner during today's Math class. We do not allow this to happen here."

Alex's admission to one of the best high schools in London strongly depends on the professor's recommendations and on the grades he will get in the 5th and 6th grade. That's why Adriana and Mihai consider their child's education one of their main priorities. Disturbed by the lack of homework, Adriana looks for other ways to fill in the gap. She bought mathematics books, a Romanian to English electronic dictionary for each one of the members of her family and children books in English. Every day after coming home from work, she helps her child learn ten new words, and every day she guides him through one set of subtraction and multiplication of large numbers. The week after I arrived, she was going to focus on teaching Alex how to solve first-degree equations.

Reset: The efforts involved in re-establishing one's career

Immediately after she arrived in London, Adriana started the procedure of getting her studies recognized in the UK. In Romania, she had graduated from a Health Science high-school in 1985, and then worked at the local hospital as a nurse for almost 20 years. In Britain, the difference between the salary of a carer and the salary of a nurse is relatively high, so becoming a registered nurse again would greatly help financially. In order to get a nurse accreditation in the UK, Adriana had to get her diploma recognized and then attend special nursing classes and get a high score in the standardized language test.

The registered nursing classes cost around 1,000 British pounds when she first enrolled in them. Taking into account that her salary was 800 pounds per month, which had to cover most of the family's living expenses and the lump sum she sent to her sister and nephews back home every month, this was a serious investment that meant living on a very tight budget.

The nursing classes lasted for eight months, ten hours a week. During this time, she also had to take two trips back to Romania to gather all her documents for the application to have her medical studies officially recognized. Meanwhile, she attended university English classes three times a week, so she could take the academic IELTS English language proficiency test. As part of the nursing classes, she had to complete a four-month internship with one of the already registered nurses in the hospital where she was working, and after the year was over she was required to write a medical research project and present it in front of a special commission.

It took three months before she received an answer from the commission on the quality of her work. By the time of my visit to the UK, she had already got a confirmation of her studies' recognition, but eight months had passed and she was still not in the possession of her registration card. She started calling the National British College of Medical Nurses every day.

Many of the nurses who arrived in the UK through a contract offered by a British employer had to go through the same process of having their studies recognized. Maria had to as well, and so did two of my other interviewees, Crista and Elena. This is what Crista said:

> S: How did you find your job here?
> Crista: I found this recruiting firm. Here they offered me a job only as a senior carer, but not as a nurse. My qualification as a nurse is not accepted here. In order to get your studies to be recognized here, you have to do many things and you have to begin by applying for the recognition of your studies at the Nursing and Midwifery Council – NMC, how they call it here. You apply and you ask for a registered nurse card. [...] It's only the bureaucracy that you have to go through. The rest is easy. It's much easier to be a nurse here than back home. What they have here is the whole "responsibility" issue. If something goes wrong, anything at all, you are held accountable in front of the Supreme Court. *Responsible and accountable*, that's how they call it.

Moving on: Learning the language and more

Maria's story is relatively similar, except that she was the only one of the four respondents working in healthcare who said that she had no trouble with paperwork in Britain. Instead, her problem was that she had failed the IELTS three times in a row. Learning English is a crucial dimension in the accumulation of human capital that an immigrant has to undertake once he has arrived in the UK. In fact, one's integration into British society and one's chances of finding a highly skilled job depend to a large extent on the immigrant's ability to speak English. All my interviewees have looked for various ways to improve their English skills. Some enrol in English language classes that are organized by universities and foreign language academies, or in specialized classes. Others take EU-funded classes, which have been free for Romanians in the UK since January 2007.

The Romanian Orthodox Church in London is also offering English language classes, every Sunday after the service is over. During my second visit at the Romanian Church in London I noticed that in one of the rooms, there were about twenty people taking an English language class from a Romanian professor. On the notice board at the entrance in the Church one could find offers for private language classes.

Acquiring a good command of English, however, my respondents all agreed, is merely the basis of the human capital accumulation that I was previously referring to. Gaining academic or vocational credentials is next.

Sergiu is 29 years old, and before coming to the UK he worked as a cameraman for the Brasov branch of a national TV station. He wanted to find work in the media as a self-employed professional when he came to Britain, and that is still his goal. He sees his current job as an administrator as a temporary situation.

> Sergiu: [...] in order to be able to make future plans here you first need a good job, which would fulfil you both professionally and spiritually. If you can't get one [such job] then you go back to school. Now it can all depend on your age, but if your age allows you to, a year or two is not too much to spend on your studying. Moreover, you will have a British diploma and this way your chances to find a good job here will grow. […]
> S: and you went to school…
> Sergiu: I went to some schools. Look, there on the wall, you can see the diploma. I took the classes of a professional photography school. I graduated already. It took me a year. There was nothing new for me, but now I have a British diploma […]

In context: Migrant workers and the remittance of human, symbolic and economic capital

A national, representative survey run by the Open Society Foundation in Romania in 2006 found that 90% of the respondents were not involved in any entrepreneurial activity, and 87% had no intention of opening their own business in the near future. 63% of the respondents identified a lack of capital as the main reason why they would not open a business of their own, while 11% named the lack of business management knowledge.

In the same study, when asked "If someone in your family works abroad, what is the use you tend to assign to the money he/she sends?" only 4% have said they opened a business. On the other hand, other studies conducted by the same organization, showed that 10% of the people who opened a business in 2006 had worked abroad themselves, and that almost 25% of those who have worked abroad see migration as an intermediary step to establishing their own business[2]. In short, returning migrants would seem to be likely to establish business initiatives in a way that local residents are not.

The following table presents a theoretical account of the types of remittances:[3]

Forms of capital	**Accumulation Unit**	**Action that generates accumulation**
Human	*Information*	*To know (education, knowledge, learning)*
Symbolic	*Values*	*To believe (socialization, reflexivity, life experience)*
Material	*Goods*	*To have*
Social	*Relations*	*To be (interaction for useful relationships)*

Table 1. **Forms of remittances**

Following this theoretical division, any type of remittances would yield a benefit to the growth of the Romanian private sector. Referring to human capital remittances, Sandu observes that the acquisition of human capital tends to overlap with the assimilation of symbolic capital. For example, the migrant will change his or her attitude to risk, the value he associates with one type of work or another, and the degree to which he is open to everything new. In other words, there is a match between these types of remitted capital and the impediments Romanians say they face when opening a business. Moreover, as a result of their human capital accumulation, it is the migrant workers who tend to acquire the qualities that might ensure a greater development of the Romanian private sector.

An important theoretical distinction is the distinction between social remittances and economic ones. The important role that economic remittances play is not contested: throughout the years 2000-2004, remittances from Romanian workers abroad amounted to 96-143 million USD and that number increased to 4.7 billion USD in 2005.[4] I aimed to illustrate in this paper that there should also be no doubt concerning the role played by social remittances.

It is true that this might be the case especially for Romanian migrant workers in the UK. The legal restrictions that were maintained in British immigration law, even after the accession of Romania to the EU, have had a significant impact on the socio-demographic profile of the Romanian worker migrating there. Data offered by the UK Home Office for the period January-March 2007 shows that men and those aged 25-34 are over-represented among Romanians in the UK [5]. Moreover, another independent research shows that almost 25% of the people who have applied for a work permit in the first three months of 2007 have at least one university degree, while 60% have at least graduated from a high school or professional school.[6] Such a background facilitates the accumulation of human capital by the migrant. But

80% of the Romanians who have emigrated to other EU countries have gone to Spain or Italy, rather than the UK, and their socio-demographic profile may be very different.

Conclusion

Romanian immigrants in the UK face a range of challenges, educational, career-wise and cultural, after they arrive. The stories of Adriana, Maria, Crista, Sergiu and the other emigrants I have interviewed clearly demonstrate these challenges, but also illustrate how these challenges are often incentives for further human capital accumulation.

In their trajectories after immigration, they are representative of the stories of many fellow Romanian immigrants in the UK.

The attention paid by these emigrants to a continuous accumulation of new human capital and the particular focus many of them put on maximizing their chances of achieving self-employment suggest that returning migrants would positively affect the Romanian economy. Knowing the situation that Romanian emigrants (like the ones I have described) face and the skills that they have developed during the course of their experience, will be important when it comes to developing a governmental strategy that would generate a high return rate of migrants. As many of my respondents have pointed out themselves, one of those incentives has to be a favourable economical environment, in which the human capital earned abroad could be exploited to its maximum.

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[2] D. Sandu et. al. (2006), *Locuirea temporară în străinătate. Migrația economică a românilor: 1990 - 2006*, Bucharest, Open Society Foundation, p.49 – 53.

[3] D. Sandu (2005), *Dezvoltare Comunitară. Cercetare, practică şi ideologie,* Iaşi, Polirom, p.66.

[4] World Bank (2007), *World Development Indicators 2007*, http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/DDPQQ/report.do?method=showReport .
World Bank (2007), *Global Financial Indicators*, http://go.worldbank.org/6ULTW41TH0 .

[5] UK Home Office (2007), *Bulgarian and Romanian Accession Statistics, January – March 2007*, http://www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/aboutus/Reports/bulgarianromanian/report1/report1.pdf .

[6] Data I collected for the IOM during an evaluation of the toll free information line part of the campaign "Without a Work Permit you cannot Work in the UK". The evaluation comprised 112 interviews with people who called the line between December 13, 2006 and March 31, 2007.