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# Migration of foreign students in Romania. The case of Cluj-Napoca

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this paper is to talk about the most common form of migration towards Romania: migration of foreign students. Thus, in this article we intend to realize a quick analysis of what constitutes this type of migration, which is the impact it has had on our country, the way in which foreign students relate to their status, the reasons that pushed them to approach the Romanian universities, but especially to capture how they have adapted to the new conditions.

**Keyword:** migration, student, foreign, impact, reason.

**M**IGRATION WAS FROM ancient times one of the defining characteristics of human beings, whether we are talking about a period of several thousand years, or the current one. One of the forms of migration, considered to be one of the most dynamic at the present time (Shen 2008: 147), which has not aroused particular interest in Romania is that of foreign students who come to study in our country.

Related to the definition of that term we should mention, as in most of the cases when it is addressed one way or another migration, there is no universally accepted definition. Even in these circumstances there is a common point of most definitions, namely that it involves to move and study for a certain amount of time in a university of other space than from that residence.

From our point of view there are at least three reasons why such analysis is one necessary. Firstly, there is a topical subject. Clearly when we talk of date we relate to western historiography. We do not include Romania because it is still in a process of adaptation and connection. This might be seen from the fact that, for example, has not yet appeared much historical work about student life in this country.

Thus, although there are studies and papers addressing the issue of foreign students they are dealing more with quantitative aspect. Secondly, we believe that an important reason is the impact that this form of migration has both on the foreign students and on

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the Romanian society. Last but not least, such a concern would lead to a better knowledge of their situation, which would help it can to a better understanding of what it means to be a student in Romania, based on the case of Cluj-Napoca.

Young people's interest in Romanian universities is not a new one. As you well know, Romania had met during the Communist period, a significant number of students from other countries. Thus, only in the 1980s (especially in the country's main university centres: Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Timișoara, but not only) were numerous students mainly from Arab countries and some countries such as Germany and Israel (\*\*\*, "Studentenți străini în România" 2012). This may seem at first glance at least unexpected or paradoxical, even from many points of view but a simple look at the situation demonstrates that this situation was a logical one, which went for some political and economic considerations.

### Why foreign students choose Romania?

Reasons for coming to Romania of that time were mainly two. In general, especially after 1971 when Nicolae Ceaușescu adopts a new leadership way, he lost contacts with the West and the privileged position of Romania, especially in terms of economic benefits. In these circumstances, the Communist leader's attention was directed to some countries in the Arab world, being concerned about the so-called non-aligned states, considering that Romania only would won from this approach (Osiac 2015: 24). Given that the relationships become very good with a number of states such as Syria or Iran, young people from these countries come to study in Romania, especially since the regime was similar to that in their own country. Of course, they didn't have a privileged position, what means that they were supervised by the Securitate (\*\*\*, "Administrația locală supraveghea studenții străini", 2007), especially because the problem of terrorism (Deletant 1998: 301). A second reason relates to the fact that many of the young people who came here were from families who migrated from Romania at some point (mostly Jews, Germans). Many of them were more than glad with the prospect of studying in the country where their family used to live at some point (\*\*\*, "Studentenți străini în România" 2012).

After 1990, as expected, things begin to change with regard to the areas of origin of the students. If, as I said, until the revolution, in particular, young people were of Arab descent, now we see a multiplication of countries that "send" student in different cities of our country. Thus, although the first remain overrepresented (in particular from Tunisia) we start to meet students from South America, Asia (especially China and Japan), Israel, and the West (in particular from France, Italy, Spain and Greece) (\*\*\*, "Studentenții tunisieni, cei mai numeroși în universitățile din România, 2015).

One reason is the policy of the European Union but also various non-governmental organizations from the West and from the country, which worked very hard after the falling of communism regime (1989). Even if it became full member of EU in 2007, Romania had begun negotiations since the early years of following the events of December 1989. This is an explanation why our country becomes a point of interest for students, in particular by the fact that foreigners are becoming more informed about it through various programs but also by the policy of European Union which is encouraging, through specific policies, since the 1980s, the mobility of students and the right to study in a different space, other than that of the country of origin (Guruz 2011: 2010).

Although it may seem surprising the number of foreign students in Romania has experienced a sinuous evolution. For instance, in 1981, there were registered 19.962 (Nicolescu, 2010: 28) of foreign students. In 2014 there were 17.000 (\*\*\*, Taxele si condițiile de cazare mai bune au atras in Romania 17.000 de studenți străini) and currently it is said to be approximately 25.000(\*\*\*, Numărul studenților români e în scădere. Crește cel al studenților străini, 2015). This situation shows that we are witnessing an increase regarding the number of students from other countries.

Please note that the above figures do not represent the number of those who graduate a Romanian university. In fact, especially after the introduction of the Erasmus programme and other similar to it, the number of those who come to study for more than 1 year has fallen, so most of those who come here, are staying just for periods of between 1-12 months (Dwyer, 2010: 151).

Linked to the reasons that pushed them to choose Romania between so many countries there are various and, in most cases, they are multiple. The reason most often stated by students is the school fees, well below the amount that would be required to pay in most European countries. In this sense, F. A. C. from Chile, a Polytechnic student, is a typical case. Coming to Cluj-Napoca in 2014, he chose the city because the fees he has to pay are very low compared even to those from his own country. He said that he has applied at several universities at the same time in countries like Hungary and the Netherlands. Even though he was accepted by more of them and their offer was tempting, however, the one from Cluj-Napoca convinced him the most financially. And he does not regret the decision (Interview with F. A. C. in 30.11.2015).

From the information provided by the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, we can see that a foreign student pays, on average, somewhere around 4000 euros (depending on the specialization and courses that the student has the right to choose) (Document taxe pentru anul universitar 2014-2015). Although the amount is apparently very high for a country as Romania is, we have to keep in mind that fees in the U.S. can reach thousands of dollars and in the United Kingdom they can be somewhere 9.000-10.000

pounds, available for example, in University of Cambridge' case (\*\*\*, „Tuition fees”). In addition to this, the sum can be higher because of the ordinary expenses, which in some cases can be around 12,000 pounds (\*\*\*, „How Much Does it Cost to Study in the UK?”, 2012) so that only those with a good financial situation can choose a university from a country they really want. With such a sum, it's not surprising the number of foreign students increases visibly.

The biggest taxes in our country are those charged by medical universities, where the amount per one year can be 5000 euros. Even in such conditions, the number of people that come to these institutions is very high. In fact, medical school is on the first place among foreign student's preferences. For example, only in Cluj-Napoca, in December 2014 were enrolled approximately 2.200 students from 64 countries (\*\*\*, „Facultatea de Medicină din Cluj, luată cu asalt de studenții străini, 2014).

A second reason is the cultural nature. In other words, there are students who choose Cluj-Napoca because they feel attracted by cultural dimension of Transylvanian. Let us not forget that the city is one typical of Transylvania, being a synthesis of Romanian, Hungarian and Saxon heritage. This situation also contributes to good fame they enjoy the area north of the Carpathians and especially myths assigned to it but also because it is known as a student town. In fact, in 2015, Cluj-Napoca was the European youth capital, being chosen in the final from a list including Ivanovo, Vilnius, Varna and other candidates.

Very interesting is the student's perception of the city as soon as the first time they walk in. F.A.C. remained deeply impressed by it though he believed that all the countries and the city are the same. He saw it as a beautiful city, different from the Santiago (the capital of his country). The city seems warmer and the student life is completely different (Interview with F.A.C. in 30.11.2015). An example in this case is the one of a Columbian. He felt an attraction to Romania and to Cluj-Napoca and he came here even though its parents did not liked the idea. It seems that in the end they agreed but because their lack of money they told him they could not help him very much. They agreed to pay the ticket but from that point he had to deal with the situation, so he had numerous difficulties when he got in Romania (Interview with C.B. in 7.01.2016).

One reason is the influence coming from others, for example, from those who have studied here. One such example is G.C. He is from republic of Moldova but later he also received Romanian citizenship. From discussions with him we can observe that he and many others from Bessarabia chose Cluj-Napoca because he got many suggestions to do it. Many of those had studied here and they told him that the universities are very good (in any case, better than in Moldova) and the student life is amazing. Moreover, he got good impression even from those who had not studied here. G.C. said that many of

his teachers, especially those from the human sciences, encourages the youth to choose Cluj-Napoca, and in particular the Babeş-Bolyai University ([Interview with C.C. in 6.01.2016](#)).

S.M. from Moldova has chosen Romania as a result of the family's situation but more especially the of his sister. When he was considering going to college, her sister was in Cluj-Napoca, studying there. At her suggestions and also to be closer to her, S.M. chose to go in the same town. He had to possibility to choose Iaşi, which is near to Moldova but it was "too close to the country and I hate Bucharest". Also, he didn't want to go to Iaşi because the fact that there are too many students from Moldova ([Interview with S.M. in 10.01.2016](#)).

It should be noted that in the case of those from Bessarabia (another name from republic of Moldova), the situation is a special one. The reasons are usually different. As you could see, there is considerable influence from parents, teachers or other young people who had contact with the environment of the city. But there are reasons regarding the benefits of studying in our country. G.C. confessed that you can get very easy the Romanian citizenship (unless, of course, you have it already) ([Interview with C.C. in 6.01.2016](#)). Then, you receive here a diploma which is recognized "beyond" (term used to call the West). Not less true is the fact that they use Romania as a way to get to the West. The same student said that that most of students from Moldova want to go to the West after graduating. In fact, only a few decide to remain here and an extremely small number consider that the best way is to return to Moldova ([Interview with C.C. in 6.01.2016](#)).

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## **The problems of foreign students**

Nothing can prepare you for what follows especially if you sweep up the steps towards a country and a culture. Usually, it is very different from that of the country you come from. Many of students ask themselves how different can be Romania comparative to Germany, France or other European countries. Often this is the first question students have when choosing Romania. And yet, many of them have a genuine cultural shock. The language, the way of being of the people, the school and its claims, dorm life, all of this become an interesting... experience.

The most reported problem is the one of language. Normally, almost none of them had any previous contact with Romanian language, except perhaps those with Latin origins. As expected, many of them leave with a presumption that everyone here know to speak English, French, German and/or Spanish. It is interesting that usually their

expectations are met which means that young Romanians know, in their great majority, a language of the international movement.

Of course, there are exceptions, for example many of employee from national institution. Also, the foreigners must learn Romanian language, a very hard thing for most them. This becomes even more difficult if your native language has not a Latin origin and usually it has not. This does not matter because all the students have to learn the Romanian language and this is a rule regulated by the universities structures. They organize Romanian courses, both at the level of courses within the faculty, as well as at the level of specialized structures (embedded within the Babeș-Bolyai University). We can mention the Alpha Centre from Cluj-Napoca or Lingua Centre. The first one offers Romanian-language as a foreign language courses (from beginner) in three levels, preparation for the Alpha test (it is a language test) and consulting services, while the second one has Romanian language courses for foreigners on three level, as well as summer courses in Romanian language ([http://www.ubbcluj.ro/ro/structura/unitati/alpha\\_lingua](http://www.ubbcluj.ro/ro/structura/unitati/alpha_lingua)).

Despite such courses foreigners do not enjoy attending to them. F.A.C. confessed that it is very difficult for him because, in general, the fact that the courses are exclusively in Romanian and rarely did the classes have English explanations. If these courses fail to arouse the curiosity of the students, they usually drop them because most of foreigners say to themselves that they will go home, so they don't really need to learn Romanian. Of course, it varies from case to case. A. F. A. took contact with Romanian language long before he got here. Being very interested in the Romanian history, he understood that Romanian language is a fundamental element and without it the process to approach its history could be almost impossible. In doing so he decided that after graduation from Chile he want to apply at the Faculty of history of Cluj-Napoca, which he did ([Interview with F.A.C. in 30.11.2015](#)).

The distance from home is also a difficulty aspect that the students must handle with. If for those who come from neighbouring countries this is not a major problem (with small exceptions) or a one to taken into account, another is the situation with those coming from outside Europe. T. H. is a student from Tunisia. He believes that for these students, this is the most difficult problem to deal with. When asked about how often he goes home, he replied that only after the graduation, which means that he has never been there for 3 years, and he will not go there until 2 years from now on. After losing a part of his family, he was forced to work in difficult condition in order to study (he was for a while a truck driver). T. H. still wants to return to his country from time to time. His chance is that there is internet and so he manages to talk almost daily with his family, even if the time zone used to create them many unpleasant things ([Interview with H.T. in 6.01.2016](#)).

S.M. confessed the only problem he had was not the distance from home (he has to go just somewhere around 12 hours by train) but that, like most of the students, whether we speak of strangers or not, he spend only a short time at home. He goes a few times there (2-3 times per year), especially in the holidays ([Interview with S.M. in 10.01.2016](#)). C.C. argues that, on the contrary, he doesn't have a problem with it especially since a part of his family is working abroad. But he goes home too when he can ([Interview with C.C. in 6.01.2016](#)).

Clearly, as you can see there are solutions. One of them is to meet with their others from their country under various organizational structures. In this sense, an illustrative example is that of the Bessarabia Group Initiative (G.I.B.) with branches in all major universities centre in the country. This is a student non-profit organization, established in 2006 at the initiative of students from Bessarabia. The declared goal of G.I.B. is to help the students from Moldova to fit into Romanian society (<http://www.gibcluj.ro/scurta-descriere.html>).

One of the major achievements of this organization is the *Bessarabian Accent* magazine, which covers various topics of interest. The success of the organization can be seen in the fact it organizes the annual "Bassarabia" festival, event that enjoys a great success, conducted in collaboration with various structures such as the League of Students from Romania or the University Babeş-Bolyai (<http://www.gibcluj.ro/scurta-descriere.html>).

The second meeting is that in the modern means of socialization. The most used is Facebook. One such example is that students from South America who live in Cluj-Napoca have created an on-line group. Within it they not only socialize but they also post important announcements for other members of the group ([Interview with F.A.C. in 30.11.2015](#)). Beyond these things, these become relevant for that because the group keeps the members in touch with each and it realize new connections between the people from various countries.

Church plays an important role and it can be a place of refuge. Cluj-Napoca it is an interesting case because many of Christian denomination have at least one church. You can also find places of worship for Muslims and Jews. It becomes important because those who attend the church keep a connection with their compatriots and the church becomes a place for support, especially because of its transnational characteristic. In this way, the home sick syndrome can be reduced substantially.

Accommodating is one that gives more headaches for young people studying abroad. It lies more in understanding the lifestyle of those who live in the space and to fight their preconceptions about otherness. ([Kelbrat 2014: 60](#)). From conversations with young foreigners, most of them confirmed that there have been hit by such a situation. H.T. is a Muslim. He said he had no problem. H.T. can free exercise of his religion and he was nev-

er labelled as “terrorist” or other offensive names. He says that the only conflict (verbal) was one had with other foreign students ([Interview with H.T. in 6.01.2016](#)).

Bureaucracy is an issue unpleasant for most of the student and it can be a long and tedious experience ([Nakireru 2000: 23](#)). Of course, Romania doesn't make an exception. C.G. believes that, at least for him, this is the most onerous task he must carry it year after year ([Interview with C.C. in 6.01.2016](#)). In other words, you have to go periodically to the various institutions of the Romanian State or country of origin and to presents lots and lots of papers. Clearly, it is necessary for reasons related to security but many consider that it should be simplified because many of the requirements addressed could be removed without too much trouble. The most important suggestion that the institutions should use more the internet ([Interview with A.A.C. in 15.01.2015](#)) and in this way students will be able to resolve many of his obligations only with their computer.

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### Student impact on society

The impact of foreign students on the Romanian society is one which in our opinion cannot be classified in terms such as “large” or “small” or other similar terms. Although less studied (most of them are articles of newspapers), we can affirm that this impact is one present, visible and active.

The wave of foreigners brings many benefits. The most important of these can be that fact of increasing the visibility of Romanian schools, growing the quality of education, diversifying a favourable price/quality ratio ([Nicolescu, 2010: 28](#)) and others. This are presented despite the many issues that our country failed to exceed in terms of education (see the problem of numerous problems such as education reforms).

Impact can be seen by the heritage they left here. Let us not forget that universities receive a great economic contribution from or due to them. Furthermore, they also contribute to the city's economy because as students, they spend large sums of money. From discussions with those interviewed much of them told my they have a very active life in terms of “going out” ([Interview with C.C. in 6.01.2016](#)), but also in other spaces such as those of a cultural or artistic interest. As expected, most of them go out with students from their own country or with a similar cultural or religious identity, although there are exceptions. F.A.C. says that goes in town very often. Usually, he is accompanied by other South Americans. The main reason is represented by the language barriers between Romanian and them. He noticed that many of the foreign students prefer to group together by nationality ([Interview with F.A.C. in 30.11.2015](#)).

After a period of exploration they come into contact and with Romanians but also



with those of other countries. The first they interact with are their faculty or fellow classmates. Since that time, except for the situations of conflict which may arise, it starts a genuine cultural exchange, in the elements of music, books and other such items. Clearly this situation is beneficial for both sides especially that they brought to the discussion topics and new realities. The most important is removal of certain misconception that exists. For example, the same student told me that, in general, Romanians say about South Americans that are very cheerful, good dancers, all the time put on fun but this is partially true. He mentioned the drugs problems or the aspect of the unsafety on the streets (*Interview with F.A.C. in 30.11.2015*).

Process visible above concerns influence exerted from and to foreign students. In the same category we can mention various events that they initiate or they participate to. We think here of festivals, magazines, and other like this.

Unfortunately, we believe that this impact in the ways that we've featured (but also under the other) it is closely related (with little exception) to way in which the institutions of the State and the school create a friendly space to develop. In other words, a special attention should be given to how to spend the amounts coming from tuition fees from foreign money. In our opinion, a part from it should be used in investments area and to increase the quality of our education system.

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## Conclusions

In conclusion, the subject of foreign students should be one of great interest in Romanian society. Far from being parsed properly and satisfactorily, the importance of this topic lies in the very understanding of one of the most active and most impactful social structures in our country: the foreign students. Understanding them can make us see how society can evolve to become competitive with those from Western Europe. Foreign students were and are a fundamental part of national education system. They come in large number but it may increase if suitable measures are taken. Let us hope that this will happen.

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