Romanian Migrants in Western Europe: Expectations, Challenges and the Importance of their Networks

Anne PIRWITZ*

Keywords: *Romanian migration*; *migration networks*; *transnational families*; *labor migration*

1. Introduction to the research project

Hardly any topic is present in the collective memory of the Romanians like the labor migration to Western Europe. Between three and four million Romanians work and live abroad for at least several months per year. The European labor market became completely accessible only after the full freedom of movement in 2014, seven years after the admission of this eastern European country to the European Union. Especially Italy and Spain became major destination countries in the early years of Romanian labor migration (Jobelius, Stoincu 2014: 3) due to simplified access to the labor market thanks to the need of manpower and lesser language barriers on grounds of linguistic relationship. In the last years, countries like Germany or the United Kingdom became more attractive, especially for higher educated migrants while the Mediterranean countries lost partly their attraction during the financial crisis but are still an often-chosen destination for lower educated Romanians or migrants with already existing networks there (Hanganu, Humpert, Kohls 2014: 6). These networks have an important role in the migration process. Already emigrated compatriots provide the potential new migrants with information and through these networks the risks and costs of emigration are reduced (Pries 2001: 34). Often the new migrants are hosted by relatives and friends abroad after their arrival and are supported by them in the search for a job and a flat. This leads to certain migration routes and people from one region or one country are often more represented in certain areas and occupational fields. Such networks lead to a so-called "cumulative causation", which means that once initiated migration brings about complex processes of change in the places of origin and arrival and leads to the stabilization and expansion of migration networks (Pries 2001: 40).

In a research project in winter 2016/17 I developed an online survey targeting 16 to 65 years old expatriated Romanians and divulged it in the social media networks. 1,190 people participated in the survey, which is basis for a

* Potsdam University, Germany (apirwitz@uni-potsdam.de).

„Philologica Jassyensia", an XV, nr. 1 (29), 2019, p. 221–230

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)

qualitative and quantitative analysis of the status of Romanian Migrants in Western Europe and the importance of their networks. This article aims to sum up the main results and to give an overview about the push and pull factors, transnational family structures, as well as the challenges and the role of networks in the migration process and the differences between the answers from the Romanian respondents living in the four studied countries: Germany, France, United Kingdom and Italy. A 6.9% of the respondents in the survey are and were living in other than the above mentioned countries. Their answers have been integrated in the general statistics but not considered in the comparative statistics.

2. Profile of the respondents

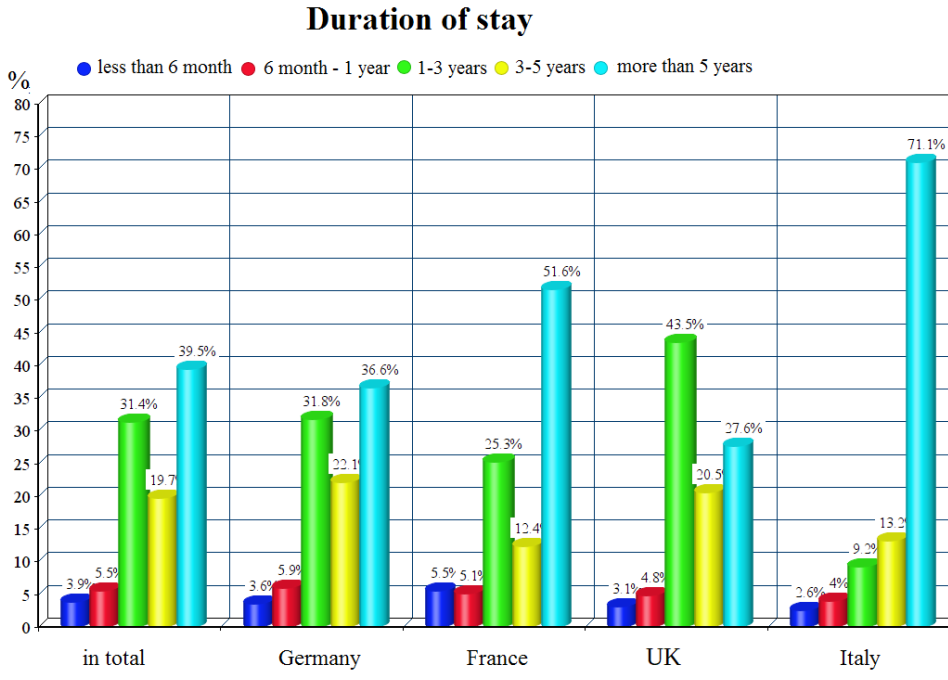
Nearly half of the respondents are between 21 and 30 years old. In the United Kingdom and France, respectively 54.1% and 55.4% are of this age while especially in Italy the age groups are much more balanced. The young age of the respondents can be explained partly by the fact that the survey was spread via social media groups, which are particularly used by the younger generation. However, this cannot be the only reason as we can see significant differences between the target countries. The age differences are also explained by the fact that France, United Kingdom and Germany are more attractive for Romanian students while Italy was a favorite destination for Romanian workers prior to Romania's joining the EU and became less attractive especially for young higher educated Romanians after the financial crisis.

65.1% of the respondents are female, 34.9% male. The amplified participation of women in the survey is more likely to be a coincidence as official statistics prove that women represent only 37% of the Romanians migrants in Western countries. (Hanganu, Humpert, Kohls 2014: 132) Only in Italy there has been a change after the financial crisis which led to the migration of more women than men as the private sector, where mostly women are working, hasn't been that much affected by the crisis. (Hanganu, Humpert, Kohls 2014: 79)

Many Romanians who decided to go abroad did so without having ever left their homeland before. 34.7% of the respondents had never been abroad before, especially the respondents in Italy, where the number is even at 51.3%. On the other hand, 28% of them had already been abroad more than five times before emigrating. Therefore, we have big differences between the respondents concerning their intercultural experience.

Graphic no. 1 shows the previous duration of the stay of the survey respondents in their respective target countries. Here the importance of Italy as a major destination for Romanian migration becomes clear. 71.1% live and lived there for more than five years as of the surveys' date. The statistics also show that Italy is becoming increasingly unattractive. Unlike in other countries, the number of those who live there for one to three years is lower (9.2%) than the number of those living there for three to five years. The increase in Romanians who emigrated one to three years ago is significantly higher in Germany (31.8%), France (25.3%) and, most of all, United Kingdom (43.5%). The reason for this lies in the full freedom of movement for workers extended to Bulgaria and Romania in 2014 by UK (among other countries), which opened completely the access to the Western European labor market for Romanians.

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)



Graphic 1: previous duration of stay of the survey respondents in the respective target countries

60% of the respondents came from three main regions, Transylvania, Greater Wallachia and Moldavia, each with about 20% representation. These are also the most populous regions in the country, and, therefore, the most numerically represented. Most respondents in Germany, almost a third, come from Transylvania, followed by the Banat with 16.5%. Large parts of the latter's German-speaking minority are living in these regions, and many of them already left Romania in the days of communism. While the lowest numbers of respondents from Germany come from the north-western region of Maramureş, in France the migrants from this region represent 1/3 of all respondents. Other important regions represented here are Transylvania, Greater Wallachia and Moldavia, with 13.6% to 15.5%. Again, the situation in the United Kingdom is different. Here, Moldavia and Greater Wallachia are the two main regions of origin, with 31% and 31.7%. Even bigger than in the UK is the number of Romanians from Moldavia in Italy, 53.9%, meaning more than half of the respondents from Italy are from this region. The fact that respondents from a certain region often chose the same country of destination already hints at the overwhelming importance of migration networks.

70.1% of the survey respondents are living in big or medium-sized cities with at least 20,000 inhabitants. Especially in the United Kingdom (91.9%) and in France (86.7%) Romanian migrants have chosen the capital or other large cities. In the UK, this can be explained by the fact that it is a newer destination country for Romanians**.** Therefore, most Romanians chose bigger cities, especially London as their first choice destination because the probability to find access to the diaspora network is higher there than in small towns. Moreover, these networks can help new

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)

migrants to simplify their arrival in the new country. In Italy 30% of the respondents are living in smaller cities (less than 20,000 inhabitants) or villages, a number much higher than in France and the UK. One reason for this could be that networks in Italy are more extensive and capillary, as the country was – together with Spain – the first major immigration target for Romanians. Therefore, the Italian diaspora is already geographically widespread and does not concentrate in major cities alone. A significant part of the diaspora in Italy works or has worked in agriculture, which also explains why an increasing numbers of Romanian migrants are located in rural areas. Even if the survey respondents are not farm laborers, they chose the region where they already knew somebody. In Germany the Romanian population is more equally spread between major and small cities than in Italy. 44.5% are living in smaller cities or villages. Like in Italy, this can be due to the preexisting networks, established mostly through the migration of Romanians with German ethnicity, who came to Germany as re-settlers even before the admission of Romania to the European Union.

3. Push-Factors: Reasons for emigration

Economic aspects are the main reason for emigration. Especially the statements "pentru un trăi mai bun" ("for a better life") and "pentru bani" ("for money") were mentioned very often in the same formulation. Financial reasons (31.8%) and the prospect of a better standard of living (26.4%) are thus the main push-factor. To some extent, they are connected, as a better life include or may include better opportunities to earn money. This also goes together with the factor of unemployment, mentioned by 9.7% as main reason for emigration.

Other reasons have been family reunification (8.3%), disagreement with the political situation and the multiple corruption scandals (6.1%), better job opportunities abroad (7.8%), studies (3%) or personal development (5.5%). Here, aspects such as curiosity, self-discovery and the gathering of foreign experience play a role. Such reasons were mostly provided by younger respondents, i.e. under the age of 30.

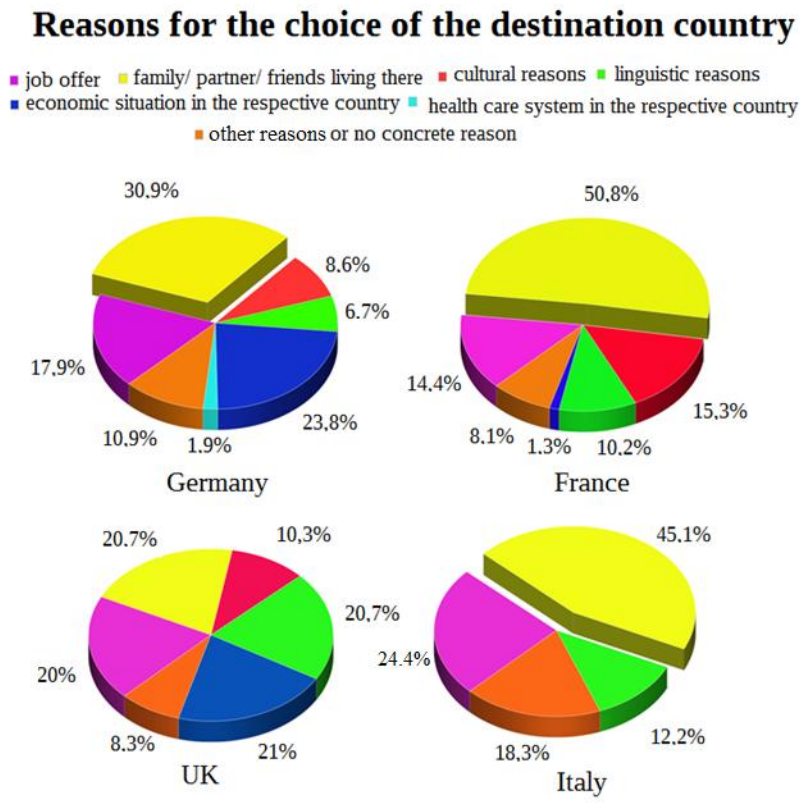
The prospect of a better life and financial reasons are the main motivations in all destination countries. However, there are also several small differences between the four targeted countries. For example, family reunification is not that popular as a reason among Romanians living in the UK, as this country hasn't had such a long "history" of Romanian immigration.

4. Pull-Factors: Reasons for the choice of the destination country

Graphic 2 shows the reasons for the choice of the destination country. In it, we can observe significant dissimilarities between the different countries. In the UK the different aspects have similar frequency. A concrete job offer, personal relations to family members or friends living already there, linguistic reasons and economic aspects are each main motives of the immigration for approx. 20%, followed by cultural reasons, at about 10%. In all other countries, the different reasons show greater divergence. In Italy, Germany and France, personal networks rate from 30 to 50%, being the most important reason. Probably even more respondents had family

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)

or friends in the respective destination country before, but other reasons have been more important for them, like the economic system for Germany (23.1%). Cultural reasons are mentioned more often especially for France (15.3%), which can be explained by the important role of French culture in the Romanian history.



Graphic 2: Reasons for the choice of the destination country

5. Occupation abroad

85.7% are employees or self-employed. Almost 8% is unemployed and the rest is still in education. The unemployment rate among the Romanian respondents is at its lowest in the UK (2.1%) and at its highest in Italy (15.8%). This also corresponds to the general unemployment rate in the respective countries. Currently, it is at 10.2% in Italy due to the economic crisis and only 3.8% in the UK (Eurostat 2019).

1/4 of the employed or self-employed respondents are active in the service sector (mainly in care for the elderly, childcare, cleaning) and 22% are working in industry and construction. Regionally there are differences. In the United Kingdom, the fields of services and industry/construction cover 37.6%. In Germany it is 43.3%, in France 49.7%, and in Italy a conspicuous 68.8%. The third largest sector is food service and food industry, with 9.5%. While the percentage of this sector increases to 16.4% in Italy, in the UK it is relatively unimportant, with 5%. 8.2% of

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)

the respondents are working in sales. Here the percentage is the highest in France and the lowest in Italy. 7.2% works in transport. This sector is more important in the United Kingdom (10.9%) than in the other countries. 6.4% are engaged in the medical field, especially in Germany, France and United Kingdom.

45% of the respondents found their job abroad with the help of friends, relatives or life partners. While in Germany and France this numbers is nearly 50%, in the UK it is only 29%. These networks are particularly important in Italy. 62.3% of the respondents owe their jobs to their personal networks. Almost a third of the respondents in UK found their job with the help of an agency. In the other countries this is not so common. The agency can compensate in part for the missing personal and family networks and even grants migrants more and better job opportunities. Especially in UK, the fields of work are much wider than in Italy where most people work in the "traditional" fields of work like services and industry.

The high rate of migrants with networks in the destination country also explains why 11.2% of the respondents rated the job hunting as very easy and one quarter as easy. 37.3% found the job hunting neither easy nor complicated. Only 15.2% rated it as complicated and 10.6% as very complicated. So the majority therefore had little or no problems in finding a job abroad.

6. Integration and Difficulties abroad

12.8% think that they integrated themselves very easy in the chosen destination country. For 25.1% it was easy. In contrast 14.6% had problems with the integration and 5.6% even bigger problems. The rest has a neutral opinion. Bigger difficulties were mentioned mostly by respondents in Italy and France. Especially in the United Kingdom the integration was rated as easy (14.9% very easy, 29.9% easy). This is astonishing since here the least respondents had personal networks which could simplify the integration. On the one hand, networks can help new migrants to find a job, an apartment or new contacts, but on the other hand, they can also impede integration as they lead to the construction of a diaspora that makes it unnecessary to integrate in the host society. Romanian respondents had fewer networks in the UK, but integrated themselves easier there. In contrast, Romanians in France and Italy had larger networks in the respective destination country but had bigger difficulties to integrate.

Even if the majority thinks that their integration wasn't a big problem, some difficulties have also been mentioned. More than a third of the respondents consider missing language skills as their main difficulty. The knowledge of the language of the destination country is often the condition for further steps. For the most jobs, but also for finding a flat, basic linguistic knowledge is essential. The second most frequent problem of Romanian migrants is the search for housing. Nearly a quarter of the respondents had huge difficulties to find an accommodation. This can have several causes, such as a lack of language skills, lack of liquidity for deposits, high rents or the general housing shortage in many big cities. Another problem is the search for a job. However, only 10.8%, meaning comparatively few respondents, considered this as their main problem. Other, but very rarely mentioned difficulties are experiences of discrimination and racism, bureaucratic hurdles, such as the

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)

recognition of degrees and documents or cultural differences. Actually, 17.1% of the survey respondents even stated that they had no problems at all abroad.

There are also differences from one destination country to another. While English was a major hurdle for less than a quarter of the respondents in the United Kingdom, in Germany, France and Italy, language skills are the biggest challenge. Even if French and Italian are related with Romanian it is still complicated for the migrants to learn and practice these languages. But the Latin languages are still easer to learn than German which was named the biggest difficulty in the destination country with 40.7%.

In Germany, France and the United Kingdom, the search for accommodation is much more difficult than in Italy. One of the reasons for this could be that many Romanians work in agriculture in Italy and often have accommodation there. However, as those migrants rarely participated in the survey, it is more likely to be due to the existing migration networks that can be useful in house hunting. Another reason may lie in the better distribution between cities and villages. House hunting is therefore a problem for only 8.4% of the respondents in Italy. Looking for a job was especially difficult for Romanians in Italy (20.1%) and France (15.9%), whereas in Germany and the United Kingdom it was only problematic for less than 10%. Experiences with racism and discrimination were twice as common in Italy (8.4%) compared to the other target countries. This can be explained by the fact that Italy has a longer history of Romanian immigration and thus discrimination towards Romanians is deeper anchored in society.

Bureaucratic problems are particularly common in the United Kingdom (5.5%) and France (4.6%), while in Germany and Italy only a very few respondents see it as a difficulty. Cultural differences are seen as problematic, especially in France (4.3%), and little or not at all mentioned in other countries.

More than a quarter of the respondents in the UK said they had no problems at all. The proportion is thus particularly high and 10 to 17% higher than in the other three countries. Here again we can see that even if respondents had more rarely personal networks there, they have fewer problems.

7. Transnational Family structures

Nearly half of the respondents have one or more children. In Germany the relation between Romanians with and without children is quite equally spread. In France and the United Kingdom 57.3% and 59.3% have no children. This is due to the lower age of the respondents. In Italy, the proportion of parents is 61.3%, which is explained by the higher average age.

More than three quarters of the emigrated parents moved abroad with their children or later caught up with them. 13.5% of those who have children, left under-age children in Romania. The majority of those parents who left their children behind are living in the UK. The situation is similar to that of the early years of Romanian labor migration to Italy or Spain. The networks, especially family structures, were not so well developed. We have already seen in previous answers that significantly fewer Romanians living in the United Kingdom already had

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)

relatives there. The lack of these networks makes it difficult to take immediate underage children, especially when migrants are single parents.

55.2% of the minor children left in Romania live with the parent who did not emigrate, 42.3% with the grandparents and 2.5% with other relatives.

The profiles of those who left underage children in Romania were examined in depth further on. 71.1% of them practice low skilled jobs abroad. 15.8% work in the intermediate qualification level and only 5.3% work in an area that requires a higher level of education. 6.8% of parents are currently looking for a job and 1.3% study. This shows that especially Romanians with low-skilled occupations leave their children in Romania. 47.4% of them went abroad one to three years ago. 27.6%, so a little more than a quarter, left their homeland more than five years ago already. 31.3% of parents with minor children in Romania want to stay abroad forever. 38% aim for a stay of more than five years. On average, the parents plan to spend less time abroad than the other survey respondents, who have no children, children of full age or went abroad with their children. Nevertheless, the proportion of those who want to stay for a longer time or forever is still relatively high. The probability increases that these individuals will be seeking a family reunion. However, it should also be noted that the surveys do not indicate the exact age of the child or children and whether the parent currently looking after the child in Romania is the partner or ex-partner. Thus, it is possible that the divorced partner, for example, began a new life abroad and the child grows up in Romania with the ex-partner.

8. Evaluation of the current situation in Romania

The last part of the survey was dedicated to the respondents view on the current situation in Romania and on their plans for the future. Almost half of the respondents rated the Romanian economy as very bad, one third as bad. Only 2% think that the economy is good or very good. Although Romania is experiencing a steady positive economic development, the fact that its economy is rated so negatively is largely due to the fact that the emigrated Romanians compare the economic situation in their home country with the one in the destination country.

The very negative view of the economy is still slightly better than the view of politics. Almost two thirds rated the political situation as very bad, another quarter as bad. Not even 2% have a positive opinion of Romanian politics. The differences in the target countries are not significant. However, a relationship between economy and politics must also be drawn, as in the open comment fields in the survey many respondents blame the government for the economic situation.

9. Development in the future

The pessimistic attitude towards Romania becomes clear by the fact that only 12.7% believe in a positive development of Romania in the next years. The rest thinks that not much or nothing will change. However, 83% believe that their personal situation will improve over the next few years. The fact that the majority believes in a positive development of their own situation, but not in an improvement of the situation in the home country, shows that many have searched and already

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)

found their happiness abroad. In all target countries, half of the respondents intend a permanent residence and 30% would like to stay longer than 5 years abroad. Nevertheless, many of them added the comment that they would like to return to Romania if salaries were to converge with Western European salaries and corruption was fought more intensively. However, since many do not believe that this will happen in the next years, they see no other option than to stay abroad. A comparison between the intended duration of stay and the previous duration of stay shows that that the probability of a long-term stay increases with increasing duration of stay. If a migrant has been abroad for more than five years, his intention to stay there permanently is higher than for migrants who moved there less than a year ago.

10. Conclusion

The article has shown some major differences between Romanian migrants in Germany, France, UK and Italy focusing on various aspects such as reasons for migration, the actual situation in the target country or their migration networks. These networks have an important role and can be seen as a motor of migration, which keeps alive the human flow from one specific region to another. Even if reunification with family members or friends were the reason for emigration just for a small part of the respondents, personal relations are the main motive for the choice of the destination country. Especially in the search for housing and jobs, the networks of the survey respondents have been very helpful. Also the social media groups, where I distributed the survey can be seen as an important transnational social network as many migrants are part of these groups where they help each other organizing travel to Romania or finding jobs, apartments or other things in the respective country or city of destination. Not only the relation with people who live in the destination country can construct an important transnational network. Also the family members in the homeland are significant, as they can for example take care of the children left at home. This leads to the construction of profound and stable transnational social spaces. However, stable networks are not a guarantee for successful integration in the destination country. As we could see, in countries with larger networks like in Italy, migrants had bigger difficulties and often more problems to integrate in the host society than in countries like the United Kingdom where the survey respondents did not have that many relations. Of course this is also largely due to the hosting society and their history and culture, experiences with immigration, social values and politics, but partially, the diasporic networks can also lead to segregation and complicate the integration in the destination countries.

Bibliography

Eurostat. Europäische Union 2019: *Arbeitslosenquoten in den Mitgliedsstaaten im März 2019* (https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/160142/umfrage/arbeitslosenquote-in-den-eu-laendern – 08.05.19 14:10).

Hanganu, Humpert, Kohls 2014: Elisa Hanganu, Stephan Humpert, Martin Kohls, *Zuwanderung aus den neuen EU-Mitgliedstaaten Bulgarien und Rumänien*, Nürnberg, Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge.

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)

Jobelius, Stoincu 2014: Matthias Jobelius, Victoria Stoincu, *Mitul „turismului social”. Migratia cetăţenilor români către Germania şi alte state membre ale UE*, Brüssel, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Ministerul Muncii 2016: Ministerul Muncii, Familiei, Protectiei Sociale şi Persoanelor Vârstnice, *Accesul lucrătorilor români pe pieţele muncii din statele membre UE*, Bucharest, n.p.

Pries 2001: Ludger Pries, *Internationale Migration*, Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag.

Pries 2005: Ludger Pries, *Zwischen den Welten und amtlichen Zuschreibungen. Neue Formen und Herausforderungen der Arbeitsmigration im 21. Jahrhundert*, Essen, Klartext Verlag.

Pries 2010: Ludger Pries, *Transnationalisierung. Theorie und Empire grenzüberschreitender Vergesellschaftung*, Wiesbaden, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Abstract

This article aims to sum up the main results of a research project made in 2016 and 2017 about the situation of 1190 Romanian migrants in Western Europe and to give an overview about the push and pull factors, transnational family structures, as well as the challenges and difficulties of the Romanian survey respondents living in Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Italy. It also considers the role of personal networks which represent an important motor of migration and constitute the main motive for the choice of a certain destination region. These migration networks lead to the construction of transnational social spaces between Romania and the destination country and have high influence in the search for housing or jobs but can also influence the integration process abroad.

BDD-A30226 © 2019 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:44 UTC)