

Immigration Policy of Romania. Challenges and Recommendations

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Abstract

International migration is a major policy issue across Europe due to direct external and internal pressures on asylum and integration systems; this review article compares Romania's immigration policy to European migration governance by focussing on structural challenges of immigrants and refugees. The legal conformity of Romania with EU asylum legislation, international refugee conventions and the Dublin Regulation is examined via qualitative examination of literature, policy papers and institutional reports. The insights from the existing literature discourse revealed that legislative responsibilities are not fulfilled in Romania across the areas of integration, institutional capability and long-term protection as Romania has asylum application and border management procedures but integration of immigrants is still slow due to poorly integrated policies, a centralised administration and a lack of social and economic support.

Keywords

Romania; Immigration Policy; Refugees; Integration; Dublin Regulation

1. Introduction and Methodology

International Migration is become one of the most complex policy challenge faced by the region of Europe in 21st century because the international migration and arrival of immigrants directly associated with the factors like geopolitical instability, economic inequality, environmental concerns and human rights breaches. The large-scale refugee and migrant movements from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa exerted pressure on EU immigration procedures and integration frameworks (Friel, 2021; Danisi et al., 2021). The EU policy framework and international conventions like the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol provide normative guidance for protecting displaced populations but migration governance effectiveness depended on the operationalisation of these commitments within the national policy frameworks and following the operationalisation dynamics: Romania is an important but understudied case because it is situated on the eastern border of Europe and serve as a transit

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and destination country for migrants and refugees. The immigration policy of Romania modified since joining the EU to reflect European interests like border security, legal migration and humanitarian assistance but Jianu (2019) and Maes and Debusscher (2022) found that Romania struggles to implement legislative commitments into comprehensive integration despite adopting major international refugee instruments and aligning some of its legislation with EU standards. National Strategies for Immigration for 2015-2018 and 2021-2025 addressed migration governance but both of the frameworks lacked a comprehensive refugee integration policy the 2021-2025 strategy is under public evaluation and lacks an action plan which consequently restricted its ability to address long-term integration issues (Mareci et al., 2023).

The increased susceptibility of Romania to migration makes the lack of a structured integration mechanism very concerning because according to Aydın (2021) and Bharti and Bista (2023), the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has significantly changed migration dynamics in Eastern Europe; Romania initially hosting over 130,000 Ukrainian migrants and sustaining millions more by 2023-2030. The global modifying dynamics tested the asylum infrastructure, social support networks, and administrative ability of Romania while highlighting gaps between emergency humanitarian measures and long-term integration; the National Agency for Refugee and Migration provides temporary housing, legal registration and basic health and security support but unable to address the challenges of employment access, social inclusion and legal stability (World Health Organisation, 2021). The presence of National Agency for Refugee and Migration reflected that Romania has institutional asylum and migration procedures providing registration, document verification and temporary shelter during asylum determination but non-EU migrants staying longer than 90 days must get residence permits while the permit is correlated to employment or educational competencies (Migration and Home Affairs, 2025). The process of permits demonstrated legal governance commitment for the immigrants but Neureiter (2022) argued that procedural compliance does not ensure effective migrant rights or social integration without coordinated national initiatives and consistent monitoring systems thus; the utilisation of ad hoc evaluations and fragmented surveys by the Romanian authorities highlighted the lack of institutionalised integration monitoring within the immigrations of refugees.

Moreover, the immigration policies can be compared using the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) as MIPEX study by Croitoru (2021) found Romania lagged behind many EU member states in labour market mobility, education, political involvement and migrant long-term security because the Romanian government focused on integrating talented non-European immigrants to support employment shortages and promote economic

development but Hack-Polay et al. (2022) illustrated that rigid administrative practises and insufficient social support structures undermine the overall policy effectiveness; reflecting the policy conflict between economic migration and humanitarian protection. The immigration policies of Romania are also impacted by its border security and strict migration priorities as the risks of human trafficking, smuggling and irregular migration routes forced Romania to strengthen border surveillance, document verification and cross-border policing (Mlambo et al., 2022; Brusylovska and Maksymenko, 2019). The frameworks with strict migration priorities improves the overall national and regional security, but Niemann and Zaun, (2023) stated that a security-based approach risks marginalising refugee protection and integration because the resources are diverted to enforcement rather than social inclusion.

The current review explores immigration policy literature on Romania to examine immigrants and refugees' structural challenges by focussing on legal protection, institutional capacity and integration gaps; reflecting the misalignment between international legal commitments and national policy implementation by contextualising Romania in the European migration governance environment. The author claims that Romania's immigration policy will fail to protect refugee rights and promote sustainable integration without a structured and comprehensive national integration strategy supported by clear legislative frameworks, transparent data collection and continuous evaluation hence; the review contributes to scholarly and policy debates on migration governance in Eastern Europe and stresses on the need for strategic innovation in refugee and immigrant integration systems.

2. Literature backed Theoretical Foundation

The comprehensive understanding of immigration and asylum involves theoretical models explaining the motivators of migration and the response by the states towards the displaced population; managing the effects of structured inequality, political instability, social interactions and legal regime changes. The **Push-Pull Model** is one of the relevant theoretical paradigms within the immigration literature discourse due to its capacity to include structural mobility determinants as Stoica and Voina (2023) found that a combination of “push” and “pull” factors influence migration decisions. The push factors military conflict, economic instability, unemployment and environmental degradation increased across the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Africa while the pull influences included the perceived safety and economic possibilities with political stability (Mousa Sabti and Sri Ramalu, 2024) therefore: Romania is becoming a transit and destination country in Europe due to its political stability and proximity to crisis zones like Ukraine-Russia war which consequently reflected that the Push-Pull Model is effective for evaluating refugee migrations into Romania because it correlates macro-

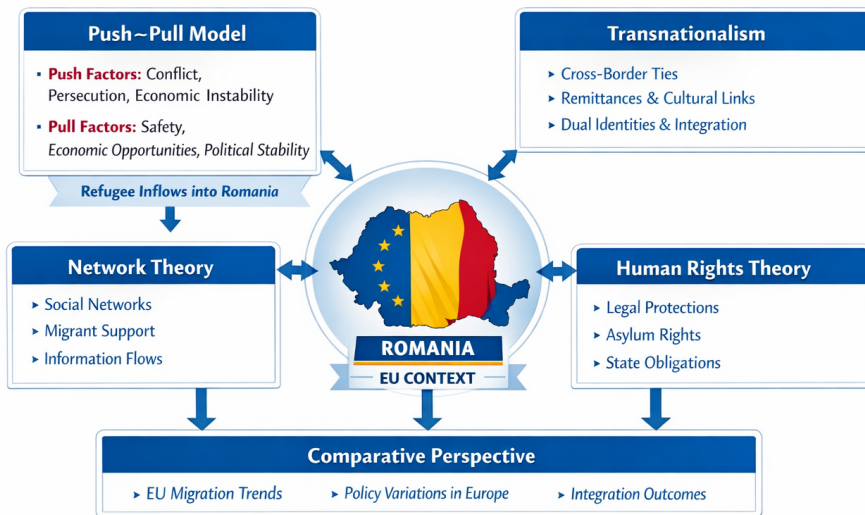
level factors in sending nations to destination-level policy and opportunity structures. The Push-Pull Model is also criticised for oversimplifying individual decision-making and discounting social relations in the literature discourse despite its potential of explaining immigration; Duan et al. (2021) stated that transnationalism provides a more comprehensive view of immigrant experiences because transnationalism emphasised on maintain economic, social, cultural, and political with the home nations. The concept of transnationalism rejects one-way assimilation and recognises migrants as active agents in diverse national contexts under which Mügge (2015) further stated that transnationalism is important for refugees and labour immigrants in Romania because they are connected with their home countries via remittances and communication. The translational connection affect the integration, identity and long-term settlement of the immigrants because transnational practices directly support the integration by ensuring emotional and financial support but Iqbal et al. (2025) argued that transnational measures sometimes hindered the integration process subjected to their fundamental exclusion from host-country institutions.

The **Network Theory** emphasised on the influence of social networks for the effective immigration and integration of the immigrants also closely related to the transnationalism as Network Theory proposed that interpersonal links undermine migration costs and risks (Spiegel, 2022) thus; family, friends and ethnic communities networks support immigrants on asylum, job, housing and legal rights. The expanding migration networks create self-perpetuating immigration systems that impact destination decisions as empirical evidences of Bélanger and Silvey, 2020 illustrated that asylum seekers and economic immigrants manage complex legal and administrative processes in host countries using established networks. The informal networks often fill state deficiencies in refugee integration support in Romania but Lőrincz and Németh (2022) cited that networks can promote social inequalities because migrants lacking social capital are more vulnerable and marginalised within the regions like Romania. The theories of transnationalism and network both focuses on migration factors and social processes around immigration **Human Rights Theory** provides normative yet legal frameworks for assessing state immigration and asylum responses; universal right to refuge and state obligation to protect individuals from discrimination and harsh treatment are incorporated in international documents like the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (Cantor et al., 2022; Dieudonne, 2021). The human rights paradigm stressed on ethical and legal obligations for government in migration governance rather than emphasising on motivations of migrants under which the theory supports the examination of the gaps between legal promises and practical implementation in Europe and Romania; Romania adopted international refugee agreements, but integration programs, legal clarity and long-term

protection mechanisms gaps are creating concerns about migrant rights (Mareci et al., 2023).

The contrast of Romania with European immigration dynamics enhances the analytical relevance of these theories as compare migration studies highlighted that economic opportunity, security and political stability are common push and pull variables across locations but policy responses and institutional capabilities are the variable factors (Heilbrunn and Iannone, 2020). Snyder et al. (2023) added that the access to housing, work, healthcare and legal support in European immigration procedures is inconsistent with international legal requirements; reflecting that national policy design and administrative capabilities influence the immigration outcomes beyond shared legal frameworks. Comparative datasets also illustrated that social networks and institutional support are important to integration success because Ilie et al. (2022) found that states with fragmented or security-based methods fail to address long-term requirements of refugees while the nations with strong integration policies and coordinated welfare systems support rapid integration of immigrants within the economical workforces; supporting the utilisation Network Theory and Human Rights Theory to examine the informal support mechanisms addressing institutional gaps at the expense of legal certainty and social equality.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework for the Immigration Policy Dynamics in Romania



(Source: Developed by the Primary Researcher: Balsam, 2026)

3. The Case of Inward Immigration Flow in Romania

Inward immigration to Romania constantly increased over the past decade, reflecting both European migration patterns and transition of

Romania from an exodus country to a host and transit state; official statistics reveal 4,200 refugees and immigrants with the rise of 17.29% in Romania within 2021 from 2020 (Topor, 2020). According to the General Inspectorate for Immigration (GII), 148,000 immigrants were lawfully residing in the country and around 96,000 of legal immigrants are third-country nationals (TCNs) with residency permits (Balica and Marinescu, 2019) hence; the numbers demonstrated that the demographic and policy landscape of Romania is influenced by inward migration. The composition of Romanian inward migration highlighted its multi-functionality as the employment, family reunification and international protection are the key pull factors; foreign-born population is 2% including 38.2% labour migrants, 26.6% family members, 25.3% international students and 10% short-term or other migrants (Besoiu, 2022). However, Culic (2019) cited that Romanian National Institute of Statistics estimates that only 1% of foreign-born inhabitants were long-term residents in 2019 due to majority of the transient and transitional inward migration.

Moreover inward immigration is majorly asylum-related as in 2021 Afghanistan (4,260), Syria (1,243), and Bangladesh (875) demographics raise the asylum applications to 9,591 yet only 1,120 were granted the legal immigration however the rise of applications from 1,260 to 9,000+ reflected the susceptibility of Romania to forced immigrations thus; Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis, Moroccans and Turks are the largest asylum-seekers (AIDA, 2022). The time trends highlighted the instability of the inward migration as immigration rose gradually between 2015 and 2019 (post-European refugee crisis) but COVID-19-related border restrictions and stronger migration controls reduced the immigration flow in 2020 (Matei et al., 2020). However, Devitt (2023) cited that majority of the asylum seekers are still under-represented in official migration statistics since they are not classified as foreign-born residents until permanent residency hence; internal immigration of Romania is low but complex asylum pressures, labour needs and rigid quotas made it peripherally relevant as an EU immigration prospect.

4. Problems for Immigrates in Romania

The immigrants in Romania encountered structural, legal, and socio-economic challenges that are different from any other member of EU despite the official agreement of Romania with EU asylum requirements and international refugee law. The pressure on asylum systems, irregular migration and integration barriers are common across the EU region but post-communist governance structure, centralised migration management and underdeveloped integration policies are unique challenges within the region of Romania (Porumbescu, 2019; Gherghina, 2021) hence; the

literature reflects that misalignment between legal compliance and practical implementation makes the immigrants of Romania vulnerable. The **absence of a comprehensive and structured operational integration framework** is one of the consistent challenges faced by the immigrants as the integration is inconsistently implemented in Romania despite adopting EU asylum directives and international norms (Cerna, 2019; Cimpoeru et al., 2023). According to Besoiu (2022) Romania classifies refugees and other migrants as “immigrants” while Pteroni (2021) found that other Western EU countries have structured national and municipal integration programmes for housing, language acquisition, employment access and civic participation with the funding support from Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The general categorisation of migrants and refugees undermine the humanitarian attention on refugees, having different requirements than general immigrants and family reunification applicants thus; refugees generally get short-term aid while immigrants found limited opportunities for social involvement.

The **limited access to socio-economic integration opportunities** in employment, education, and housing is another correlated issue for the immigrants because EU migration policy focuses on labour market integration as a medium to self-sufficiency (Freeman and Lewis, 2021) but Gherghina and Miscoiu (2025) found that Romania struggle to implement this focus with lack of occupational training, skills recognition and language support for employment. Jianu (2019) and Rehejeh (2020) both illustrated that immigrants experience protracted uncertainty, prohibiting them from working during the processing of their immigration or asylum petitions yet the skilled immigrants better achieve legal status and employment rights however; Joormann (2019) stated that Sweden encourage early labour market for all immigrants to ensure integration and reduce welfare dependency. The **legal uncertainty and prolonged immigration or asylum procedures** also served as core challenge for the Romanian immigrants as *Law 122/2006* established official procedures but its bureaucratic structure lead to delays and lack of transparency (Roşca, 2021; Polese et al., 2022). The immigrants similar to refugees need to in temporary housing centres for long periods while awaiting their documentation however, these delays are common across the EU but inferior administrative competence and institutional coordination in Romania compounded the complexity hence; the immigrants lacked the permanent residency rights until their petitions are validated.

The **dominance of a security-based and centralised migration governance model** is another issue for Romanian immigrants because the migration system of Romania is strictly regulated by the Ministry of Interior's General Inspectorate for Immigration, with limited municipal or civil society

input (Schöfberger, 2020). Panebianco (2019) highlighted that unlike Romania many other EU states use multi-level governance models with collaborative roles of local governments and NGOs to ensure integration of immigrants however, the Romanian approach prioritises border control and irregular migration management with increased border monitoring (Üstübcici et al., 2022) hence; the strict border policy complements EU security goals but also undermines the integration and protection concerns, promoting the assumptions that immigrants are security risks rather than rights-holders. The **irregular migration and restrictive border practices** made immigrants and refugees more vulnerable as Cimpoeru et al. (2023) reported that 1,420 Syrians and 2,365 Afghans acquired the immigration in 2023 due to the location of Romania between the Balkan and Eastern migration routes; the increased border restrictions and interceptions have led to denied entrance or delay prior the immigration filing which reflected that Romania prioritises prevention and control above immigrants reception (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019).

Furthermore, **lack of reliable data and systematic monitoring for immigrant's integration outcomes** complicates the integration processes in Romania as Gabriel (2020) cited that Romania lacks employment, education, health access and long-term integration datasets for immigrants due to excessive refugees. The gaps in datasets undermine the evidence-based policymaking and integration measure evaluation while the established EU states like Germany utilise integration indicators and monitoring frameworks aligned with EU benchmarks to evolve policy (Papadopoulos and Fratsea, 2022) thus; underdeveloped data infrastructure of Romania hindered the accountability and combines refugees with working immigrants. Following the fragmented data infrastructure, the **social exclusion and limited societal engagement** is persistent for the immigrants because the history of Romania as a country of emigration rather than immigration and decades of communist isolation; impacted public perception and institutional preparation for diversity (Fratsea and Papadopoulos, 2020). Romania is currently adjusting to its host status, unlike Western European countries with long-term multicultural policy histories yet the language hurdles, cultural remoteness and limited community-level integration marginalise the immigrants (Pripoaie et al., 2022) however; NGOs International Organizations for Migration (IOM) trying to manage the marginalisation but the centralised governance of Romania limits their positive influence (Fitzek, 2021). The Romanian immigrants often generalise as refugees and exposed to the complicated interrelated issues that represent EU migration issues and country-specific limitations however, Romania is compliant with European migration requirements but integration policy, legal certainty, governance decentralisation and socio-

economic support marginalised refugees more compared to the other member states of EU.

5. Dublin Policy Support Framework in Romania

The Dublin Regulation governs the asylum and immigration policies in Romania as the country is a vulnerable Member State, using to Dublin system to comply with EU responsibility-allocation mechanisms and its structural constraints of asylum system. According to Gherghina and Munro (2023) Romania received 9,493 Dublin asylum petitions in 2021 with a rise from 3,221 in 2020, reflecting increased secondary movements and rising importance of Romania in EU migration corridors however OECD (2025) reported a low transfer rate of 1.59% despite 815 outgoing requests; demonstrating a misalignment between formal policy design and practical implementation.

Brandl (2016) highlighted that family unity aligning with the humanitarian goals under Dublin III Articles [8-11] is the ultimate policy strength for Romania; Romanian authorities are flexible enough to accept photocopied documents instead of DNA testing while unaccompanied minors were successfully reunited with family in Germany and Belgium due to the family unity (Wallis, 2023). The Articles [119] and [127] of the Asylum Act in Romania governs the govern responsibility determination, interviews and transfers while implementing the Dublin framework across the immigration processes; Eurodac fingerprinting and Dublin interviews are strong but their punitive aspects such as prolonged confinement for refusing to fingerprint raise uncertainty over authority trust across the immigration process (Bartel, 2024). However, Linos and Chachko (2022) established that appeal and suspension mechanisms of Dublin support framework protect the immigrants by providing judicial review and free legal aid yet the five-day appeal deadline and the restricted examination of destination state reception conditions by the courts impaired the substantive protection. The Dublin Policy Support Framework in Romania manages complex immigration because it provides legal clarity and humanitarian safeguards but the limitations of high case turnover and discretionary suspensions reflected structural contradictions between EU solidarity principles and national competence; reflecting that Dublin processes facilitate asylum seekers rather than regulate the mobility of immigrants within Romania.

6. Recommendations

Following recommendations are develop to support the immigration policies in Romania while managing the current challenges for the immigrants:

A) Integrated national strategy: Romania needs a comprehensive and legally applicable national integration framework to differentiate refugees, asylum seekers, labour migrants and family reunification applications while the differentiation strategy must include measurable targets for employment, language acquisition, housing and education within a comprehensive action plan, and dependable financial methods.

B) Multi-level and Decentralised Governance: Migration governance should go beyond security-focused centralisation by empowering local governments, municipalities and civil society organisations under which the General Inspectorate for Immigration, local governments, NGOs and international organisations should work together to improve service delivery, minimise administrative bottlenecks and facilitate community-level integration.

C) Strong Monitoring and Data Collection Systems: Romania should institutionalise integration monitoring by collecting trustworthy data on employment, education, health and long-term stay because aligning national indicators with EU benchmarks like MIPEX will promote evidence-based policymaking, transparency and continual review; ensuring that policy reforms benefits for immigrants and refugees.

7. Conclusion

The review article assessed the immigration policy of Romania within the European migration governance framework while following the structural, legal and institutional barriers for the immigrants; the evaluation revealed that Romania has formalised its legal framework with EU asylum directives and international refugee agreements but policy execution is still underdeveloped while the refugee infrastructure, administrative capacity and social support services stressed amid the geopolitical crises like the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The migration governance of Romania is majorly centralised by focusing on border control, procedural compliance and regulation-based task distribution yet the Dublin framework provides legal clarity and humanitarian safeguards; its low transfer rates, operational inefficiency and procedural rigidity undermine substantive protection of asylum seekers. However, without a national integration policy the employment, legal stability, education, and social inclusion are further impacted but the international protections are majorly ignored by treating immigrants and refugees as a single group. The research collectively found that current immigration policy of Romania associated with the risks of marginalisation rather than sustainable integration without institutionalised integration mechanisms, decentralised governance and regular monitoring however; protecting migrant rights and strengthening long-term social cohesion and compliance of Romania with European

migration standards required a balance between institutionalised integration mechanisms and decentralised governance.

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