

Many Mobile, Few Successful: Ethnicised Return in a Changing Romanian Context

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This article contributes to the growing debate on reintegration and the positioning of returnees in their home societies. Increasingly, studies focus on returnees' agency in reintegration processes, their practices of mobility in return and their use of social capital and financial and social remittances acquired abroad. Much less analysed is how ethnicity influences such processes of return and experiences of reintegration. In this paper we examine how returnees belonging to different ethnic groups – Germans, Romanians and Roma – reintegrate in a Romanian multi-ethnic context with marked ethnic inequality and lasting segregation. Fieldwork was carried out in a town that has undergone massive changes in the past 30 years due to the combined effects of foreign direct investment and international migration. Economically, the town changed from a poor and decaying context, to one that was poor but developing and finally to one experiencing strong development. Using a modes-of-integration perspective and analysing returnees' reintegration and mobilities, we show how return evolved as an ethnicised process in different contexts of reception.

Keywords: return migration, contexts of reception, mobility, ethnicity, Romania

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Introduction

This article contributes to the growing debate on processes of reintegration and the positioning of returnees in developing societies (Kushminder 2017; Lietaert and Kushminder 2021). In line with recent debates in the literature on return migration, we consider that return and returnees' reintegration often occur in relation to their mobility and transnational practices – that is, not just as processes of permanent return and settlement (Sinatti 2011). We employ a modes-of-integration perspective and aim to go beyond individual cases in order to compare the return experiences of members of different ethnic groups. We analyse return processes in a Romanian multi-ethnic town, asking why return was so differently experienced by members of the three ethnic groups – Germans, Romanians and, especially, Roma. We look at return as an ethnicised process, a perspective that was less used in previous research.

The context of research was not randomly chosen. Romania is a multi-ethnic country and experienced large flows of migration and return (Sandu 2010). Sebeş, the town where our fieldwork was conducted, is also a magnet for incoming foreign direct investments in Romania and it became attractive for autochthonous investors, too. It is therefore expected that returnees in Sebeş would have more opportunities upon return than in other Romanian cities that offer fewer economic opportunities. It is also a town with strong ethnic inequality as it has a large, segregated and poor Roma community. Finally, international mobility and return are significant, thus enabling us to witness a variety of return experiences.

We carried out qualitative fieldwork in six successive periods between 2013 and 2021, which allowed us to observe and directly discuss the different return and reintegration strategies. The town went through dramatic economic changes and thus, based on interviewees' personal accounts, we divided the reintegration processes into three periods: the 1990s, the 2000s and the 2010s – which can be described using Portes' and Böröcz' (1989) terms of *decaying* (or hampering), *poor* (more neutral) and *prosperous* (or more advantageous). In what follows, we first set out the theoretical and empirical background to the paper, summarising recent debates on returnees' integration in general and on return to Romania in particular. Next, we introduce the methodology of our case study and then discuss comparatively how returnees with different ethnic backgrounds fare in the various contexts of reception by looking at their agency and practices of mobility.

Debating returnees' reintegration

The notion that the return of migrants to their home contexts is a natural and easy process has been criticised for some time now (Markowitz and Stefansson 2004). Return as reintegration acknowledges the fact that the return process, like that of migrants' adaptation in countries of destination, requires adjustments by returnees (Christou 2006) in that they must often alter their aspirations and strategies in response to the perceived changes at home. In this respect, the recent literature has started to interrogate and theorise the notion of reintegration, largely defined as an individualised process that people go through upon arriving back in their home societies (Kushminder 2017).

Reintegration is analysed as a multi-dimensional process of participation (Cassarino 2004; Lietaert and Kushminder 2021): economic – when returnees are able to sustain their livelihoods – social, cultural and political when they reconnect to their communities of origin and their relatives and friends, feel safe and have access to justice (Kushminder 2017). It is somewhat to be expected that the refugee and deportation literature should discuss reintegration difficulties, whereby refugees and deported migrants may face resentment and stigma, broken social ties (Nisrane, Morissens, Need and Torenvlied 2017), dangerous situations (Majidi 2021) or reluctant bureaucrats (Medina and Menjivar 2015). Studies have addressed the return of economic migrants from different perspectives. Within the debates on return and development, there prevails an optic whereby

returnees are often seen to have a privileged position *vis-à-vis* non-migrants, with the potential to become agents of development (Papademetriou and Martin 1991). At the same time, studies predominantly in economics, which interrogate the determinants of return migration from different theoretical perspectives (Constant 2020), focus on the returnees' entrepreneurship, use of remittances, employment and wage premiums (Hagan and Wassink 2020). However, the literature also points to strains, hindrances and ambiguities in their positioning at home, despite the return migrants very often being better-off than those left behind (King, Castaldo and Vullnetari 2011).

Debates on modes of reintegration go beyond individual experiences and discuss typologies of return experiences in respect to the duration of return, the differences between countries of origin and destination or the voluntariness of return (Kushminder 2017). Depending on the theoretical perspective informing this debate, return can be regarded as a failure – from a neoclassical perspective, where returnees aim at migrating and staying abroad – or as a success (Cerase 1974), from a new economics of migration perspective, where returnees migrate in order to acquire resources but their ultimate goal is to return home. If some typologies focus on the reintegration strategies of those better or less integrated (Kushminder 2017), others focus on feelings of familiarity with the context of return (Dzięglewski 2020).

A different approach is how return experiences vary in accordance with social categories such as age, gender or ethnicity. In this respect, studies show a variation in the return experiences with age. If, among adults, labour-market participation is paramount, among the elderly issues like health services, purchasing power and quality of life are decisive (Ciobanu and Ramos 2016). Similarly, children's return is shaped by their experiences in schools and peer socialisation (Vathi 2016). Furthermore, return is often considered a gendered process and women may encounter more difficulties than men if they are of working age (Vlase 2013) or if they are pensioners (Gualda and Escriva 2014). Thus far, ethnicity has not often been addressed in studies on return migration – with the exception of so-called ethnic return migration (Tsuda 2009). In the Romanian case, a few studies deal with the return of the Roma (Anghel 2019; Toma 2018) but less is known on how the members of different ethnic groups reintegrate comparatively.

Firstly, our understanding of returnees' reintegration recognises it as embedded within migrants' mobility projects and transnational practices (Sinatti 2011). Re-migration, in our understanding, is not a lack of reintegration and returnees can be involved in different forms of mobility while being simultaneously engaged in processes of reintegration. Therefore, we regard return as a differentiated practice – looking mostly at seasonal, temporary, long-term and permanent stays (King 1996). Some spend a more limited amount of time in the country of origin and re-migrate to countries of destination, while others attempt to resettle in the home country at a certain point in time. Secondly, we look at how returnees use their social capital, financial resources (remittances) and cultural capital (including social remittances) in order to renew ties with their social contacts, make investments and access local opportunities. Thirdly, we address returnees' agency within contexts of return. Observing how much the contexts changed, we use Portes and Böröcz's (1989) distinction between the different contexts of reception, from advantageous to handicapped (or adverse) and try to understand how returnees cope in such different contexts. Whereas Portes and Böröcz (1989) posit that economic, political and legal aspects of contexts of reception form certain coherent patterns, in this paper we focus on returnees' economic integration. Finally, while embracing a constructivist understanding of ethnicity (Brubaker 2006) we ask what migration and return opportunities are available for members of different ethnic groups and what strategies they employ upon return.

Below we provide an overview of Romanian return migration in light of the existing literature. We then introduce our case study and offer an analysis of how return is experienced by members of different ethnic groups and how changing contexts influence these reintegration processes. As our research was carried out in

a multi-ethnic context with strong ethnic inequality, we also address the broader relationship between migrants' reintegration, mobility and social inequality (here considering ethnicity).

Return migration in Romanian society

Since 1989, when state socialism collapsed, Romania has evolved to become a disembedded neoliberal policy regime, known as 'a low wage, low benefit country' (Ban 2016: 67). Throughout the 1990s it underwent heavy deindustrialisation, which left millions of laid-off workers attempting to make a decent living in Romania with hardly any alternatives. At the time, Western Europe restricted entrance to Romanian citizens, so emigration as an alternative was expensive and resulted in the migrants having an illegal status on the Western labour market. Throughout the 1990s, migration was represented by the migration of ethnic Germans and Hungarians and an increasing flow of irregular migrants from Romania. Ethnic Germans tended not to return and the return of Romanians was also low as labour migration was low (Anghel and Coşciug 2018).

In 2000, Romania became a candidate for the EU, which sent a positive signal to the multinationals looking to relocate or extend production units into cheaper and less-regulated labour markets. As multinationals were starting to arrive in Romania looking for well-qualified and cheap workers, these latter were gradually choosing to emigrate for better paid jobs in the West, as visa requirements were lifted for Romanian citizens in 2002. Romanian migration therefore grew substantially. This period of time witnessed high return rates, with one in two migrants returning within a decade of their departure (Ambrosini, Mayr, Peri and Radu 2012). The high percentage of return was also possible given the fact that new border regulations no longer hampered their mobility.

In 2007, Romania became an EU member state. As there were no legal restrictions to mobility, both migration and return developed, involving more than 20 per cent of the Romanian population, including many from the poorer segments of society (Anghel and Coşciug 2018; Sandu 2010). Stănculescu and Stoiciu (2012) mentioned that, between 2009 and 2010, 26 per cent of the households surveyed in a number of regions had migrant members and 4.5 per cent of them had returnees. Martin and Radu (2012) mentioned that the level of return in Romania was similar to that in other Eastern European countries – about 7.6 per cent of the active population. Therefore, studies on Romanian return migration indicate return as a consistent process that affects a large part of Romanian society.

Most of the studies on return migration in Romania were conducted in the last few years and debate the causes and patterns of return migration. They show that socio-economic and structural conditions are intertwined with emotional and cultural ties in motivating people to return. Studies identified perceptions of discrimination abroad, feelings of belonging or attachment to Romania or the place of origin and cost–benefit calculations as the most common drivers for return (Gherghina, Ploeanu and Necula 2020; Roman and Goschin 2012). The level of income abroad correlated inversely with the probability of return – the higher the income, the lower the likelihood of return (Roman and Goschin 2012). Return intentions were also positively influenced by migrants' transnationalism – their remitting behaviour (Roman and Goschin 2012) and regular visits to Romania and the existence of networks of friends and relatives (Gherghina and Ploeanu 2020).

Romanian returnees followed a variety of integration pathways back home. While many encountered adverse conditions, others found jobs or ended up as self-employed or entrepreneurs. Studies about returned entrepreneurs draw up typologies, look at how the returnees combined local and transnational opportunities (Anghel and Coşciug 2018) and analyse factors enhancing entrepreneurialism, such as the duration of migration (Anghel and Coşciug 2018; Croitoru 2020), their level of education, remittance savings, gender (Croitoru and Coşciug 2021) or human-capital accumulation during migration (Croitoru 2019). Whereas many of the entrepreneurs analysed in these studies were able to establish sufficient and constant incomes for their

families, others re-migrated – especially the self-employed (Croitoru and Coşciug 2021) – sometimes in spite of community social support (Tudor 2017).

Some studies portray a somewhat optimistic view of return migration in Romania and consider that returnees and their households benefited from migration: they enjoyed a wage premium upon return and brought back skills valued on the labour market (Martin and Radu 2012), while temporary migration had positive longer-term effects on skills and possibly drove wages up (Ambrosini *et al.* 2012). Other studies point to the difficulties encountered on the labour market and how returnees chose to re-migrate despite their emotional attachment to the country and place of origin (Apsîte-Beriña, Manea and Berzins 2020; Bermudez and Paraschivescu 2021). Other studies critically interrogate inequality in return migration, discussing the positions of women (Vlase 2013) or of the ethnic Roma (Anghel 2019), who tried to overcome the marginal positions to which they were relegated at home. They open up to debates not only about labour-market participation but also on returnees' positionalities with regard to local social hierarchies, values and social norms. Our article shares this critical perspective and interrogates processes of return and inequality in return among German, Romanian and Roma returnees, looking at different contexts of reception and at how returnees balance mobility and settling strategies.

Methodology

The empirical material used was collected between 2013 and 2021, divided into six periods of fieldwork of between three weeks and two months each. We identified the patterns of involvement of migrants with life at home and their possible effects on local communities. In order to have a broad and complex overview of return practices, we set the limits of stay abroad at a minimum of six months but set no limits on the number of years since return; nor did we insist that the return be regarded as permanent or temporary. Hypothesising that there would be some variation along ethnic lines, given the social composition of the town, we made a point of including in our target group people from all three main ethnic groups – Romanians, the Roma and Germans – and with different return experiences, whether self-employed, entrepreneurs, employed persons and unemployed, women or men. We interviewed both returnees and 'knowledgeable' people – that is, persons who had not migrated and therefore had good insights into the local social and economic dynamics. We conducted 37 interviews with 'non-migrants' – priests, headteachers, school mediators, town counsellors, teachers, persons active in business and youth associations – and occasionally family members of people who were still mobile. We asked them about migration and its effects on the town and how returnees fared upon return. We used the snowball technique to establish contacts and triangulated the information, allowing us to gain different angles to stories already told and to view some of them with circumspection – for instance information concerning events which occurred prior to our arrival and which were essential in understanding the present.

We interviewed 106 people in all (73 men and 33 women), of whom 58 were Romanian, 16 were German, 27 were Roma and 5 were immigrants from Germany, Austria, the UK and Italy. With several of our interviewees we developed a closer relationship and remained in contact over the years. Sixty-four of the interviews were returnees – people who had returned for more than just visits – who were attempting to remain in Romania for a longer period of time. The main destinations of migration were Germany (15), Spain (15), Italy (8), the UK (6), France (5), the Netherlands (2), Greece (2), the USA (2) and Switzerland (1). A further 8 had multiple destinations. The Romanians and Germans were more educated: 35 had tertiary education, 20 had finished high school and 19 vocational school. Among the Roma, only 2 completed high school, with many having a maximum of eight years' schooling. Of all our interviewees, 30 were entrepreneurs and self-employed, 29 were employed locally, 9 were students and 9 were retired. The rest were unemployed or worked abroad. Amongst the Roma, 6 were employed, 2 were entrepreneurs and 1 was a pensioner. The rest

had no regular employment in Romania. The length of stay abroad also varied among and within the ethnic groups. The Germans stayed the longest, with an average of 11.6 years and 6 out of 10 staying more than 10 years abroad. Among Romanians, 9 (out of 30) remained abroad for more than 10 years and had an overall average of 8 years abroad. The Roma were mostly involved in temporary mobility (14 out of 24) although 4 out of 24 spent more than 10 years abroad.

Most of the interviews lasted an hour and a half to two hours. We audio-recorded them, transcribed them *verbatim* and analysed them thematically, looking at categories of returnees and of return experiences. We also took detailed notes from *ad hoc* discussions and analysed them, together with the transcriptions of the interviews. Interviews with returnees were semi-structured, following the background of the person (the origins of the family, where s/he grew up, his/her education, job experiences prior to emigrating), migration (migration decisions, jobs and life abroad, length of stay, transnational relations and practices of mobility) and return (motivation, expectations and post-return economic reintegration and experiences, including transnational practices, re-migration). We also tried to gain a sense of the succession of personal events and how the economic and social contexts played out for them at the time. The examples we present in the sections in which we discuss the empirical evidence are based on patterns across interviews. We changed all names and personal details, while still trying to retain the voices of people who entrusted us with their stories.¹

The context of research

Our fieldwork was concentrated in the town of Sebeş, including its small satellite localities. Sebeş is a small multi-ethnic town in southern Transylvania in central Romania. Nowadays, it has a population of about 27,000 people, of whom the greatest majority are Romanians, followed by the Roma (4,000), Germans/Transylvanian Saxons (400) and a very small number of Hungarians. In Transylvania, belonging to one ethnic community or another was associated with a certain prestige and, in Sebeş, social hierarchies are still built on ethnicity as well as on social status. Romania is a multi-ethnic society that had historically large communities of Hungarians, Germans, Jews and Roma. Many have retained their ethnic identity, others have assimilated to different degrees and others emigrated. Just as elsewhere in Romania, most of the Germans from Sebeş emigrated, with the support of the German Federal Republic, during communism or immediately after its fall in December 1989. The Saxons' gradual departure from Sebeş left both Romanians and Roma with a sense of symbolic loss.

Before the 1989 change of political regime, Sebeş had a diversified industry, yet not large enough to absorb the entire labour reservoir. Despite the communist official ideology of jobs for all, in the 1980s unemployment was already starting to become a problem, especially for Roma youth. Coupled with dire food and heating shortages, it led to a tense social climate. The resentment among Romanians and Roma also escalated. The former blamed the failure of communism on the corruption and laziness of the Roma and tried to limit and control their use of the town's public spaces. The latter, historically discriminated against and marginalised, found themselves trapped between the locally shared rhetoric that described them as beneficiaries of communism and their everyday struggle to survive. The collapse of state socialism after 1989 only deepened the crisis, with the Roma being the first to lose their jobs followed by poor Romanians. Most of the ethnic Roma also live in a large and poor neighbourhood – having no proper utilities until a few years ago – are poorly educated and often unemployed.

As the local prestige is based on ethnicity, Romanians did not want to be associated with the Roma. Besides, for Romanians, local prestige was tied to entrepreneurship combined with ancestry, as one of our interviewees comments: 'One has a standing here if one runs one's own business and is from a good family'. The same is true for the Roma but for other reasons, as they have tried to emulate the Saxon tradership: 'When the communists made the land reform in 1945, they asked us [the Roma] if we wanted farming land, but we wanted

to be traders like the Saxons, not peasants like Romanians back then' (an elder in the Roma community). Entrepreneurship, as opposed to salaried blue-collar work – 'the taken-for-stupid man who works on a quota' – continues to be a measurement of success for the Roma, too. Referring now to local symbolic hierarchies, the Roma hold nuanced and situated views about Romanians, informed by the same criterion of success: a person may be deemed worthy of respect when s/he associated with a trade and business ethos as opposed to agricultural or blue-collar work. From our fieldwork, entrepreneurship emerges as the local measure of attainment for both wealth and social validation, a category that cuts across ethnic boundaries. The notion of success or of successful persons that we use in this paper derives from what local people considered 'successful' – usually entrepreneurs owning larger companies or those employed in managerial positions in them. Furthermore, what emerged from our interviews was the three-period division of postcommunism in economic terms (investments, wages, employment) and of migration patterns, each shaped by opportunities. The 1990s was a period in which the economy was in a state of collapse. In the 2000s, the economy began to recover, catering mainly for the national market; foreign investments started to be made in the town, creating jobs, although not so well-paid as to prevent many of the people from migrating. After 2002, migration also expanded as there were no longer any legal restrictions to mobility to EU countries. After the economic crisis of 2008–2009, the third period is when the local economy increasingly flourished, offering expanding opportunities to both remainers and returnees. In what follows we analyse the processes of return in these three time periods and explain how ethnicity played out in them.

The 1990s: return in a collapsing country

Migration to Western Europe was a 'natural' solution for many Romanians, Germans and Roma, although their migratory experiences differed. It was mainly ethnic Germans who were able to emigrate legally. Their move was swift – most of them left in the first two years after the change of regime. For Romanians, emigration was much more difficult, expensive and full of uncertainties, so their migration was far less intense. With even fewer resources than Romanians, only a very few Roma were able to emigrate and those who did returned home quickly after their migration projects failed.

This was a period with a small number of returnees to Sebeş. From among those who migrated to Germany and Western Europe there were, on the one hand, the Germans who still owned houses in the region and spent summers there and, on the other, a handful of people – Germans and Romanians – who returned to live in Sebeş on a permanent basis. Due to the fact that the research was conducted after 2010, we did not learn about many cases of re-migration in this time period but captured a few cases of initial failed return whereby returnees continued migrating for a number of years after returning again. For the returnees who remained, it was a period when they could invest their savings in property at extremely low prices – in some very few cases, they converted their wealth into successful businesses. Martin is one such an example. He is a German who migrated to Germany in 1987, where he spent five years and returned to Romania in 1993. He admits that he worked hard and fared quite well in Germany – but he did not feel at home: 'Although I spoke German and tried to work hard (...) I missed my place and the forests and hills [from here]'. His business assets were his savings and, as he said, with a few months' savings in Germany, one could buy a house in Romania. He returned for good with his entire family and ventured into the local hospitality industry, often catering for German tourists. Still today he passes, by local standards, as a well-off entrepreneur.

Another returnee, Dragoş, an ethnic Romanian, came back from the UK. During state socialism he mediated commercial contracts between the local leather factory and Western European clients. When socialism collapsed, he conducted business with the same factory, which ended up in private hands in the middle of the 1990s. Maintaining his market access in the UK, he took the opportunity to invest in production facilities in

several other local factories in Romania that were struggling to compete in a nascent open-market economy. However, because of the overwhelming lack of trust that was prevalent in this period and the drive of his associates for graft and rapid enrichment, he backed out – a scenario that was common back then in Romania. After a while, he opened his own leather factory and a tourist facility. Today he produces leather objects for both global fashion brands as well as mass-market Romanian and Italian brands.

The analysis of a few cases of return from the 1990s shows a highly selective emigration, little return and high benefits for some of those who, risking their savings, set foot in a newly emerging market with untapped opportunities. Reintegration strategies differed. In the case of Martin, he invested his remittances in properties and a business, while Dragoş used his market relations to benefit from local opportunities. In other cases, reintegration was realised as an alternation between stays and moves abroad – as was the case with some small-scale entrepreneurs and with German pensioners spending their summers in Romania. In this period, ethnicity played out particularly in the emigration of ethnic Germans who used the support of the German state, while the emigration of Romanians and the Roma was quite difficult and risky. Return was also ethnicised – Germans returned either as larger entrepreneurs or as returnees during summer vacations. There was a single case of a larger-scale Romanian entrepreneur who returned. Some other Romanians returned in the 1990s with the aim of setting up their businesses but re-migrated because of the still-difficult economic context.

The 2000s: return in a poor context

Consistent with the national trend, already towards the end of the 1990s a series of foreign investments were made in the town and local entrepreneurship started to take off, developing further throughout the 2000s. In the main, Italian and Austrian companies opened up factories in wood-processing, furniture, appliances and the leather and textile industry, while a series of Romanian companies opened up small-scale factories in the food industry, textiles and hospitality. Despite the growing job offers on the local market, salaries remained low – about 100 US dollars per month in 2002. The trend was ascendant, though, between 2002 and 2009, with a rapid appreciation of assets, an increase of salaries and a growing number of jobs.

This coincided with the growth of labour migration of ethnic Romanians. As, throughout Romania, emigration became less selective and more widespread, migrants went to Germany, France or Italy and, in smaller numbers, to Greece. Spain, however, was the main destination and Romanians accessed jobs through social networks, especially in the fast-growing secondary labour markets. Their incomes abroad were far superior to the wages at home. Return also became far more frequent and diversified. Marian, an ethnic Romanian, left initially for Italy and moved on to Spain. In 2009, the economic crisis and some health problems made him and his wife return to Romania, where they started a business in freight transportation – initially with only one truck and a hired driver – and constantly expanded it. Marian was largely satisfied with his return. He was far from being rich, he said, but lived comfortably and felt in control of his life.

With some small variations, Marian's trajectory is common for other Romanian returnees, too. George, for example, migrated repeatedly throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s and, just like Marian, started small, with a family bakery business. He secured the finances for the extension of the business by re-migrating several times. In 2005, he and his wife moved the production to a new building with brand new equipment and only then did they feel that it was safe to contract credits to increase production and open a couple of shops in the region. This was the moment when they decided to put an end to migration. In the meantime, salaries increased and the overall economic situation improved, which was visible particularly in the growth in consumption. Migration also opened up new markets abroad. George's company now sends traditional bread and baked desserts to Romanian shops in Spain. George and his wife managed to take advantage of their local assets, the remittances that George sent from Spain and the expansion of their market at home and abroad.

The difference in opportunities at home between the two periods – the 1990s and the 2000s – is captured in the story of Robert – another Romanian entrepreneur with migration experience in Germany and Spain. For about seven years in the 1990s, Robert worked in Germany in a car repair shop for three months each year. Apart from savings, he brought home second-hand cars which he sold for fairly good margins. With the money he earned, he started to build a house and took the first steps towards opening a car repair shop in Sebeş: ‘I wanted to be my own boss and have my own business. I thought that if you work for yourself and you work hard you will make it’. However, business was not great in the 1990s as purchasing power was plunging, so he saw no option but to prolong his migration career. For four years he worked in a car repair shop in Spain. He saw the economic situation in Romania improving and, in the mid-2000s, decided to return there and give his business a chance. He invested around 50,000 euros in his car repair shop, hired a helper and got back to business, building a good reputation for himself: his shop was brand new and equipped with modern tools and he was committed to delivering the same quality as abroad. Like Marian and George, Robert employed a temporary migration strategy throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, when economic opportunities were scarce. From among the ethnic Germans, there were only a few cases of returnees. Paul, who returned in the mid-2000s, took home some financial capital and carpentry skills, so he set up a carpentry shop with modern tools, computer-generated plans and a team of a dozen men. He soon made a name for himself as one of the best roofers in the region and the business expanded as the house construction and repair market in the area started to grow.

The improving economic and social context in the early to mid-2000s led to the emergence of a group of small-scale returnee entrepreneurs, mostly Romanians, although some of them were only just managing to make ends meet. Erica, the owner of a small kebab restaurant in the historic centre of town, had lived for more than 10 years in Spain, where she had worked in the hospitality industry. The economic crisis struck Spain and she and her husband were affected. When they returned to Romania, her husband and some associates started a business in transportation, while she opened a kebab shop in a rented restaurant, something she was familiar with from Spain. Yet she struggled, as returns and margins were low. Another friend of hers, Adrian, had also returned home once the crisis hit Spain. Before the crisis he had made some attempts to return and open his own business in Romania but he felt he could not provide properly for his family, who had to share the same house as his parents in downtown Sebeş so he remained mobile, repeatedly moving between Romania and Spain. He did not manage to make substantial investments upon return and somehow became stuck working alone as a self-employed informal plumber.

According to our fieldwork data, the ethnic composition of migration changed between 1990s and 2000s, as those who emigrated were now mostly Romanians and a small number of Roma. In comparison to the previous period, when few returnees invested their remittances and developed in a scarce but risky environment, the later returnees from this period encountered a still poor but enriched context with expanding opportunities. Return started to grow and diversify in this period. Some returned from Germany after a few years there, opening up small-scale businesses in services (carpenters), trade (with second-hand or consumption goods) or tourism. Others returned from Spain and entered the transportation business. Even though they accumulated sufficient remittances, their purchasing power decreased as Romanian assets appreciated several times compared to the previous period; however, they were able to profit from the wealthier consumption market that had developed in Romania. Other returnees who worked in Germany and Spain established small meat-processing plants supplying fresh meat products both to the local market and to some of the Romanian communities in Spain. These small businesses also grew due to the new opportunities in Romania, which decreased the role of financial remittances compared to the 1990s. While, in these cases, some returnees tended to be content with their achievements and were locally considered prosperous, others such as Erica and Adrian were somewhat dissatisfied and did not pass as successful even though they tended to stay put. In this period

there were also a number of returnees who took jobs locally although many preferred to remain mobile between Sebeş and different European destinations.

From the 2010s onwards: return in a more prosperous context

After the economic crisis of 2008–2009, foreign investments continued to come to Sebeş. Many individuals were also striving to develop their own businesses or work autonomously, with returnees among the most dynamic. The opening of a large gearbox factory by a German multinational company attracted employees from the entire region and set up higher salary expectations. Labour-market offers also improved locally. Romanians began to have diversified jobs although the Roma held out little hope of obtaining rewarding jobs. Some worked in the textile, leather and wood industries for a minimum monthly salary under what they described as ‘carceral’ conditions, some worked in the collection of scrap iron and others were employed by the municipality’s street-cleaning company. Several of them ran informal businesses like working in wrought iron or in construction or running very small shops in the Roma neighbourhood.

Ethnic patterns of migration and return changed significantly in this improved economic context. If, in the previous period, it was mainly Romanians who emigrated while most of the Roma lacked the resources for emigration, this time it was the Roma who were on the move in large numbers. The Roma’s migration was initially precarious, with people performing street jobs or occasional informal labour. Their stays lasted several months and were dispersed across many European countries, including France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain and Greece. Although most of them left temporarily, an increasing number succeeded in prolonging their labour contracts and residence abroad. Examples are Alexandru and Mioara, who settled in Germany, Alexandru working as a guard in an amusement park, while Mioara was a cook and waitress. Elena, another Roma woman, used her seamstress skills, acquired from her father, to secure a job in a small tailor’s shop in Spain. In more recent years though, Roma migration was directed towards France, with many more settling there for longer periods of time.

For the ethnic Romanians, return migration diversified even more than in the previous periods. We see diversity both in their strategies of adaptation and in how they fare – just as in the previous period, many of them remain caught up in temporary migration, some keeping their secured employment at home and supplementing their income by leaving for short-term work abroad. However, we also identified an ever-growing pool of those who felt that they could ‘manage’ in Romania for the moment, as either employees in well-paid jobs or owners of small-scale businesses. The smaller entrepreneurs worked alone or ran businesses with several employees. They were active in hospitality, small-scale services and construction work. Their return pathway was similar to those who had returned in the previous period, capitalising on their remittances and the prestige of the professionalism acquired while working abroad. They aimed mainly at keeping their businesses running and securing a decent income.

Then there is the category of those who saw themselves and were seen as successful businessmen who managed to combine different types of resource. Sebastian came back from Spain where he says he was the well-trusted administrator of holiday homes in a renowned tourist destination. He saw an opportunity to return and invest in a tourist residence. He combined his savings and finances from the business associates he met in Spain with the 40,000-euro funding from a Romanian government scheme to support returning migrants. In a different case, Lucian invested in a vineyard in a picturesque village close to Sebeş, while he ran his main business, together with his associates, in the automotive industry, 60 km away. Other successful returnees capitalised on their experience abroad to access middle- and upper-management positions in foreign companies in Sebeş or managed new foreign investments in town.

Unlike for the majority of Romanians, the return of the Roma was in most cases linked to their temporary migratory practices. People returned regularly and used the money earned abroad to pay their debts at home, support their households until the next trip abroad and invest in the new houses they were building in the extending Roma quarter. The conditions of return continued to be adverse for them. Salaries remained small for the positions they could occupy and even when they did qualify for better ones, they felt discriminated against. Therefore many tended to re-migrate. Comparing experiences abroad and at home, they felt even more deeply the discrimination against them in Romania and claimed that they should be treated as equals. Such claims were often accompanied by examples of how they had been treated in the past by the Romanian authorities, the managers in the companies they worked for or in their daily encounters. ‘There [i.e. abroad] you are treated like a human being, not like here’, stated Oana. Such statements were repeatedly rehearsed when returnees remembered their migration and labour experiences.

What characterises this period is that, in contrast to earlier ones, the poorest people were also able to move abroad and return, meaning that reintegration patterns therefore diversified even more than before. Many returnees attempted to become entrepreneurs by tapping into expanding opportunities at home, some more successfully than others. Compared to previous periods, financial remittances were less important for successful returnees, who could now access different sources of funds, such as private investments, European and national funds and access to companies investing in the region. Occupying managerial positions within these companies was also labelled as a success by the locals. Other returnees also started to take jobs locally, some of them well rewarded by local standards. Access to good jobs was often mediated by acquaintances and usually taken by well-connected Romanians. The Roma and poor Romanians had low-paid jobs, often irregular for the Roma, so many took temporary jobs abroad in order to supplement their incomes. Therefore, those without regular employment or on low salaries continued to be mobile as part of their reintegration strategies.

Conclusion

Recent debates on returnees’ reintegration discuss their labour-market participation often from a perspective in which their accumulated remittances and the knowledge acquired abroad can enhance their overall economic performance (Hagan and Wassink 2020). Different studies discuss the position of women and of men upon return (Vlase 2013) or the return and economic performance of members of certain ethnic minorities, such as the Roma (Anghel 2019; Toma 2018). In this study we analyse returnees’ reintegration as an *ethnicised process*, by looking comparatively at how Germans, Romanians and Roma re-integrate economically. Comparing these cases, we noted that ethnicity first provided differentiated access to international migration. Ethnic Germans were privileged and were the first to move to Germany. Ten years later Romanians moved as labour migrants and after 2010 the Roma moved as more precarious migrants. There were very few Germans who returned as entrepreneurs with larger or medium-sized companies and more who spent summer vacations in Romania. The return of Romanians was more diversified. There were a few who became larger-scale entrepreneurs, either using the opportunities available in the 1990s or afterwards when the consumption market grew and diversified. There was also a category of Romanian small-scale companies which were opened up by returnees in services, hospitality, production and so on. Some others took jobs, including managerial ones, in multinational companies. Besides this, there were also Romanians who maintained practices of mobility abroad in order to make ends meet. The Roma were the most disadvantaged. They were the last to migrate as they had fewer resources and were not included in the migration networks of Romanians. Their return was tied to mobility – some still having jobs in Sebeş, some others failing to land a job despite many attempts. Among the Roma there was only one case of a returnee entrepreneur – in general they took on salaried or informal

work. Most remained mobile, as they faced poverty at home. The way in which members of the different ethnic groups re-integrated reinforced local ethnic stratification, with the Roma being on the lowest rungs.

In each of these three periods, returnees from our case study could be grouped into ‘successful’ Germans and Romanians – prosperous entrepreneurs and employed managers in international companies; ‘not successful but earning enough’ – the self-employed or employed, usually Romanians; and ‘mobile’ – some making ends meet and many others, such as the Roma, scarcely able to escape poverty. Success in return was perceived to be based on returnees’ positions back home and not in relation to the goal of migration – return or settlement abroad (Cerase 1974). What is more, ethnicity also played a central role in the local hierarchy of prestige, with Germans and Romanians at the top, followed by the Roma, who were vulnerable and socially excluded. This ethnic hierarchy played out not only symbolically but also in practices of inclusion and exclusion on the labour market and access to opportunities, where the Roma were the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, unlike the Romanians, who could use their social capital to access opportunities. In Table 1 in Annex 1 we summarise the economic positions occupied by the interviewed returnees.

The return migration of members of the different ethnic groups evolved in relation to the various contexts of reception (Cassarino 2004), influencing returnees’ use of remittances and mobility. In the first, the *decaying context* (Portes and Böröcz 1989), mobility was low but returnees had the advantage of getting a good deal for their money by investing in properties whose value skyrocketed in the next decades. Some others were not able to make ends meet and chose to re-migrate. In the *poor context*, there were no legal barrier to mobility and there was more return. There was rapid growth in the consumption market and more business opportunities. More returnees were able to gain a foothold on the market ladder as entrepreneurs, many maintaining the same line of activity as abroad, making the most of the acquired skills – what Hagan and Wassink (2020) call ‘occupational channelling’. They opened up cafés, restaurants, small construction businesses, car-repair shops and other service companies. Many of them, however, whether entrepreneurs or not, maintained their mobility in order to overcome difficulties and minimise the risks related to running businesses in a poor economic environment. The purchasing power of remittances declined; however savings from abroad still offered a good start when setting up small businesses.

In the third – *more prosperous* – context, migration became available to everyone who wanted to migrate, including the poorest. Return further developed and diversified. As Romania was an EU country, new sources of funds became available for would-be entrepreneurs and trusted managers: new industrial investments needed managers, European funds were offered for small-scale companies or for returnee entrepreneurs and some private investors sought new opportunities. This time the most successful were those able to access these funds and bring aboard potential investors. Small-scale returnee entrepreneurs also continued to come but in a more competitive context. Only in the advantaged context did the higher level of salaries start to attract more returnees, including those aiming to take jobs locally. If, in the previous periods, mobility was an important resource that those set to return could draw on until they were able to realise their return plans, in the *prosperous context* it was the poor, such as the Roma, who continued to vacillate between Sebeş and different destinations abroad. Remittances were used for investments in the first two periods – less so afterwards – and for consumption throughout all the years. Know-how, skills and foreign connections remain equally important throughout the three contexts – however it was mainly Germans and Romanians who used them. This variation in contexts thus provides the grounds for an explanation of why and how the process of return was so differently experienced by the members of the three ethnic groups. This made us reflect not just on how return is experienced in divided societies, here based on ethnicity; seeing how differently returnees fare and use remittances and mobility in different contexts emphasises the need to locate return processes within broader political and economic processes.

Notes

1. During the research we ensured the anonymity of the participants. We followed the research ethics strategy of the project ReturnITA where we detailed the ethical principles and practices of the project, https://returnita.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/returnita_strategia_de_etica.pdf.


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Annex 1

Table 1. Patterns of ethnicised return in Sebeș

Ethnicity/Period	Germans	Romanians	Roma
1990s	Little return made of lifestyle returnees and a few successful entrepreneurs	Little return One successful entrepreneur Some small scale mobile entrepreneurs	Almost no return
2000s	A few returned entrepreneurs	Some small and medium scale entrepreneurs Mobile returnees	Almost no return
2010s		Stronger return More returned entrepreneurs Some taking good jobs locally Some poor mobile returnees	Strong return linked with mobility No entrepreneurs

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