# Brave New World

## Romanian Migrants' Dream Houses

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**Romanian Migrants' Dream Houses**

Edited by Raluca Betea and Beate Wild

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# Contents

# Reflections on the State's Role in the Development-Migration Nexus: Romania at the Turn of Millennium

**Romana Careja**

Drawing on insights from the institutional approach to development, this paper argues that a state's involvement is necessary to channel resources from emigration for the purposes of development. It argues that the *laissez-faire* approach adopted by the Romanian authorities is not enough to capitalise on emigrants' resources for development, because it does not encourage activities that generate productive economic cycles.

Romania has a large emigrant community. Emigration started slowly in the 1990s, but picked up after 2000, when travel restrictions were lifted. Confronted with dim prospects of finding work, many Romanians had little choice but to emigrate. It has been estimated that, at its peak (around 2007), Romanian emigration to EU member states surpassed 2 million (Eurostat 2011), i.e. roughly 20% of the Romanian population of employment age. About 36% of these emigrants worked in construction, 28% in agriculture, 15% as household employees and 12% in the hospitality sector. Although the vast majority of emigrants had low and medium education levels, highly educated health care and education professionals, IT specialists, engineers and researchers also emigrated (Alexe et al. 2012).

There are different points of view as to the positive and negative consequences of emigration for source countries. On the one hand, it is argued that the circulation of ideas and resources between host and home countries allows the latter to catch up (Guarnizo 2003; Portes 2009), where what matters is how the resources produced by the emigrants are used (Martin 1992; Chindea 2005; Demurger 2001; Bagasao 2005; Guarnizo 2003; Leon-Ledesma and Piracha 2004). For example, emigrants can contribute *passively* to the development of local economies when they or their families buy local products and services, and contribute *actively* when resources are invested in revenue-generating enterprises embedded in the local economies. On the other hand, critics have argued that emigration has anti-developmental effects on the sending countries, such as depletion of workforce, brain drain, increased inequality, dependency on remittances and corruption, and inflated prices of land and housing (Delgado-Wise and Covarrubias 2006).

Undeniably, the large efflux has had both positive and negative effects on the Romanian economy and society. On the positive side, significant sums of money have been remitted. Studies have shown that approx. 60% of emigrants, in particular those in EU countries, remit money regularly, although the amounts have changed with the stages of immigration and economic cycles: remittances increased through the 1990s, peaked in the mid-2000s, and decreased into the late 2000s (see Table 1). Most remittances were used for consumption,



acquisition of durable goods and home refurbishment, with a smaller part used as investment in the future (children's education, saving accounts or pension funds) (Chindea 2005; Sandu et al. 2004, 2007; Pop 2006; Horváth and Anghel 2009). The predilection for consumption has been associated with individuals' desire to improve their own living standards, to compensate for periods of poverty or to assert their status in the community. In comparison, only 6% of households use remittances for investments (Pop 2006), which are usually microenterprises involving mainly family members, and catering to local needs in the construction, transportation or service industries (Vlase 2011; interviews with key informants).

| Year | Amount | Year | Amount | Year | Amount | Year | Amount |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1991 | 70 | 1996 | 436 | 2001 | 1,031 | 2006 | 5,530 |
| 1992 | 80 | 1997 | 456 | 2002 | 1,612 | 2007 | 6,172 |
| 1993 | 89 | 1998 | 623 | 2003 | 2,028 | 2008 | 6,610 |
| 1994 | 153 | 1999 | 535 | 2004 | 3,100 | 2009 | 4,360 |
| 1995 | 237 | 2000 | 861 | 2005 | 3,900 | 2010 | 3,810 |

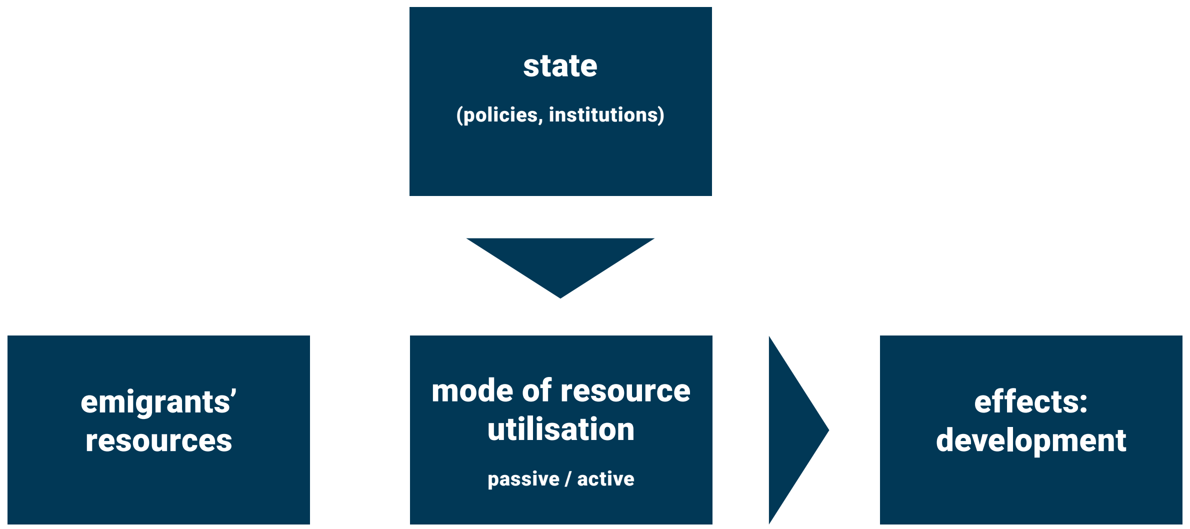
Table 1 – Estimated amount of remittances to Romania by the Romanian National Bank, in millions of Euros

*Source:* Alexe et al. (2012).

At the same time, however, the massive emigration wave has also arguably been associated with negative effects. First, it has depleted the work force. Before the economic crisis of 2008, the National Statistical Institute recorded the highest vacancy rate of 2.06% at the level of the entire economy, with the strongest demand in agriculture, construction, manufacturing, health and education. Second, although remittances have sheltered numerous families against poverty (Roman & Voicu 2010), they have also introduced price distortions and effectively limited the opportunities available to those without emigrant relatives to purchase scarce goods such as real estate. They also created visible rifts within communities between families of emigrants and those of non-emigrants (Sandu et al. 2004, 2007). Divorce rates have increased after prolonged departure of one of the family members, and it has been estimated that approx. 300,000 children have grown up without parental supervision (in the care of other relatives) while the parents worked abroad. Some of them dropped out of school, left their relatives and engaged in various criminal acts (OSI 2011).

From a state policy perspective, the question emerges as to whether the negative effects of emigration might be minimised, while maximising the positive ones. The search for answers to this question brings us back to the important point raised in the development debate, namely that the *mode of resource utilisation* is the key to positive or negative effects of emigration on the host country. As Figure 1 shows, the mode of resource utilisation mediates between resources and their potential (positive or negative) effects. For example, the passive use of resources is most widespread, but is highly dependent on the remittance cycle. Thus, it is likely to have an unsustainable impact on local development. At the same time, the active use of resources has the strongest impact on local development, because it engages resources in productive economic activities (Chindea 2005; de Haas 2010). Therefore, the development of those *modes of resource utilisation* likely to produce positive effects should be encouraged. In this approach, the mode of resource utilisation is the consequence of states' policies. Individuals' preferences for the passive or active use of resources thus becomes the result of state policies which may discourage investment behaviour and encourage consumption, or vice versa.

In this framework, development (at the local or national level) is the result of state-society interactions, where the state creates the framework to channel productive societal forces towards developmental goals (Evans 1996a, b; Amsden et al. 1994). This synergistic interaction does not occur spontaneously since, without external intervention in the form of incentives and opportunities, societal actors are likely to follow their own interests (Evans 1996b). Moreover, positive developmental effects at the societal level are directly connected to setting goals for the common good (Evans 1996b).




1. The moderating role of the state in the relationship between emigrants' resources and their developmental effects

If emigrants are conceptualised as potential developmental resources, then the states, through their policies and institutions, can build channels and create incentives for emigrants to engage in activities which in the long run have the potential to contribute to local- and, ultimately, national-level development. There is no recipe for how to proceed (Evans 1999b), but previous studies have identified a handful of measures likely to steer resources in a developmental direction. If emigrants have resources such as funds, skills and potential investment interests, the state can provide an environment in which these resources can be put to productive use, by supplying *complementary goods* that cannot be otherwise provided by other public or private actors (Evans 1996b). First, the state creates *the rules of the game*, specifically the rules and regulations that define a good investment climate, which have been shown to matter for emigrants' decisions to remit (Martin 1992) and invest (Orozco 2009). Second, the state can supply *intangible goods,* in particular related to the creation and diffusion of knowledge and information about investment opportunities. Third, the state can provide *tangible common goods,* such as infrastructure and direct financial support, which make returning and investing an attractive and feasible option (Démurger 2001; Tseng and Zebregs 2002).

While the connections between emigration and local development are possible, and theoretically yield a positive picture, I now turn to evaluate the extent to which the Romanian state did indeed provide such (or similar) complementary goods targeted at its emigrant community. This discussion relies on information collected from interviews with key informants (mayors in several localities with large emigration), and secondary literature in the form of public opinion surveys and reports issued by public authorities and concerned with various emigration-related aspects.



## Regulatory framework

As private entrepreneurship is largely considered the key to dynamic economies and thereby to development in general, the regulations concerning their creation and functioning and the rules concerning the general economic climate are of utmost importance. During the 1990s and 2000s, the performance of the Romanian central and local authorities in these areas was poor. The *Transition Reports* of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD 1994–2013) surveyed yearly the development of the economic and business environment. Together with the European Commission reports (EC 1998–2006), they noted small improvements, whose potential for producing positive effects has been clawed back by rampant corruption and a problematic legal environment. A stable, predictable and stimulating environment for potential entrepreneurs did not materialise. Successive governments failed to produce coherent legislation, and in spite of a declared support for private initiative, the regulatory environment maintained cumbersome requirements and the administrative procedures lacked transparency. This situation had two unwelcome effects: it encouraged petty corruption and maintained uncertainty as to private property rights, thereby limiting the ability of the justice system to uphold them (EBRD 1994–2013; EC 1990–2007; Heritage Foundation 2006–2013). According to the World Bank experts, at the end of the 2000s, Romania remained one of the least entrepreneur-friendly countries in the EU (World Bank 2011). Besides the complex bureaucratic procedures (World Bank 2011), the tax system has often been seen as a disincentive for private entrepreneurship, due to the fact that it has undergone numerous, unpredictable and sometimes controversial changes that have neutralised financial forecasts or business plans (Deloitte 2009). At the end of the 2000s, Romania scored 40 (on a 0 to 100 scale, where 100 is the best) on a private property protection and enforcement index (Heritage Foundation), and registered an unimpressive score of 3.7 (on a ten-point scale, where 0 indicates the most corrupt) on the Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International). Its poor record on fighting corruption has been repeatedly identified as a major drawback for the development of market institutions (EBRD 1994–2013; EC 1998–2006; MCV 2008–2013).

At the same time, private entrepreneurship opportunities have been affected by the predicament of the financial sector. Caught in the middle of a reform process themselves, banks were keen on consolidating their own assets, while limiting their lending to private entrepreneurs who were largely regarded as risky investments (Pîrvu et al. 2008). Although micro-finance and micro-credit firms entered the financial market targeting these small entrepreneurs, their resources were not sufficient and, undoubtedly, risk-averse emigrants were reluctant to enter into partnerships with these new, largely unknown, types of credit providers.

Thus, for most of the 1990s and 2000s, the regulatory environment was uneven: although private property was upheld as a principle and private entrepreneurship hailed as the way forward, corruption, uncertainty related to enforcing legislation, and changing fiscal regulations impeded positive developments. Access to financial resources constituted a major concern for potential private entrepreneurs, but the developments within the financial sector led to a situation in which, despite an improved regulatory system, banks became reluctant to lend to small entrepreneurs.

## Intangible goods

*Intangible goods* aim to (re)connect emigrants to their home country or facilitate their return. The measures adopted by Romanian authorities that can be included under this label have largely been reactions to changes in the flow of emigration, economic needs or decisions by other governments. A large number of Romanians worked abroad during the 1990s and 2000s, but much of their activity was only borderline legal. In order to minimise potential abuses and to ensure the correct treatment of these labour emigrants, in 2000 and 2001 the government adopted Law 156/2000 and GD 384/2001 to specifically regulate the activity of private work placement agencies. Only later in 2004 were attachés for labour and social affairs sent to the countries which saw the most Romanian emigrants (Germany, Austria, Italy, Great Britain, Ireland, Spain and Hungary), with the specific task of supporting and protecting labour emigrants' rights. On a more active note, when the Italian government took measures against illegal workers in 2007, directly affecting many Romanian citizens, the Romanian government developed a Plan of Measures (GD 1347/2007; Ministry of Labour 2011) focusing on information campaigns regarding the rights and obligations of Romanian citizens in Italy, as well as job opportunities in Romania (GD 187/2008). Attention to a possible return was triggered by the economic boom of 2007 and 2008, when it was estimated that 300,000 jobs became available in the Romanian construction sector alone (Ministry of Labour 2011). In 2008, four job fairs were organised in Italy and Spain, and a link with job opportunities in Romania was placed on the websites of the Romanian embassies (Ministry of Labour 2011). According to experts, the interest in these initiatives was low, due mainly to the unattractive salaries offered on the Romanian job market (see also Alexe et al. 2012).

The domestic market shrank in 2009 under the effects of the economic crisis and the government – through its Ministry of Labour – stopped all measures aimed at convincing emigrants to return (Ministry of Labour 2011). At the same time, it offered a series of services for returning workers, such as information and professional counselling on job searches and professional development. They could also benefit from the general anti-unemployment and job-creation measures, such as assistance for starting up private enterprises and advantageous credits for new private enterprises that create new jobs (Law 76/2002; Ministry of Labour 2011). Although no information exists about the extent to which emigrants took advantage of these opportunities, indirect evidence suggests that at least the interest in counselling programmes was large among potential entrepreneurs (CCRIT 2011).

Last but not least, it has long been known that, especially in rural areas, remittances circulate via informal channels, banks are mistrusted, and knowledge about financial instruments is lacking (IRES 2011). This means that there is a need to intervene, both in terms of increasing trust in official money transfer channels as well as in terms of financial education of remittance recipients. As other types of financial actors, such as money transfer organisations, started operating on the financial market, some banks developed instruments tailored to the needs of emigrants, and initiated campaigns advertising savings and investment instruments (Bevilacqua 2009).

A mixed picture thus emerges with respect to the provision of intangible goods such as information and knowledge. While the state has implemented a variety of measures to support emigrants while abroad, in particular to ensure that their rights are respected, returning migrants have benefited from less direct attention. The returning migrants have had access to the same services as non-migrating unemployed and other potential entrepreneurs, but little



effort seems to have been made to identify and tap the specific potential of emigrants. At the same time, while awareness about the needs, problems and interests of returning migrants has been relatively high at the local level, where the interaction between public authorities and citizens has been the highest, there has also been a visible lack of success integrating returnees into local-level discussion fora aimed at finding locally tailored solutions. Although several interviews with key informants have uncovered the disposition of local authorities in helping returnees "as much as possible, within our responsibilities", at no time have organised information campaigns or discussion groups ever been led for the returning migrants about the opportunities available through local or national programmes.

## Tangible goods

Last but not least, the state is expected to provide *tangible goods* which are of public interest, such as infrastructure and direct support for entrepreneurs. To start with, Romania's infrastructure is visibly unequal: well-developed around urban centres, it remains problematic in rural areas. The state of the infrastructure is a clear deterrent for potential entrepreneurs, for whom poor infrastructure translates into costs. Therefore, they prefer to start their business close to a city, and consequently the village of their origin remains excluded from emerging economic activities. Ultimately thus, rural areas are likely not to benefit from these productive activities. One relevant question which emerges is whether individuals' resources can be mobilised for infrastructure projects tailored to local needs. No evidence for a systematic interest of citizens in engaging in activities to produce collective goods has been found. In several interviews, mayors revealed that they refrained from asking for contributions (work or financial) for small infrastructural projects "because people are not inclined to donate". At the same time, it was noted that the local churches collect large sums of money, and that emigrants in particular are quite generous in their donations. However, in none of the localities visited were the local authorities cooperating with the churches in local development projects.

The typical example of direct governmental support for entrepreneurial and development projects involving emigrants' resources are the 3x1 and 1x1 projects in Mexico, where for each dollar provided by emigrants the government contributes 3 dollars (for local development projects) or 1 dollar (for business ideas), respectively. The Romanian government does not run similar funds matching programmes, but has launched, under various EU funding schemes, several programmes supporting investment opportunities in agriculture (managed by the Ministry of Agriculture) or the creation of small and medium enterprises (managed by the Ministry of the Economy). Information about these programmes is available directly from the individual ministries or agencies managing them, but it remains unknown whether returning migrants participate in these programmes. What is known, however, is that when many emigrants' businesses collapsed during the 2009 crisis, the affected entrepreneurs resorted to migration in order to accumulate the resources needed to shore up the effects of the crisis (CNIPMMR 2011). The fact that they preferred to migrate instead of using business-related know-how and financial resources provided through official governmental programmes, speaks not only to a lack of information, but also a lack of trust, and of ease in accessing available resources.

## Discussion and conclusion

The states' right to tap emigrants' resources for the common good can be questioned. However, it can be justified if the aim of state action is not an attempt to simply extract resources from emigrants, through taxation, for example, but is instead the initiation of a process through which it creates a context that enables individuals to feel confident in pursuing long-term investment projects following their private interests. Such actions will then sustain (local) economies and ultimately (local) development. Development thus results from the synergy between individuals' interests and actions and the legal and structural context provided by the state (Evans 1996a, b).

Romania is in need of development and has a large emigrant community with strong links to the home country. Romanian emigrants, while risk-averse and critical of prevailing institutional and structural conditions, remit large amounts and are nevertheless interested in becoming entrepreneurs. In this context, what role does the state play?

Several interviews with mayors and migration experts, as well as policy documents and official reports suggest that the Romanian state has adopted a *laissez-faire* approach to its emigrant community: it provides support in some areas, but does not channel emigrants' resources in specific directions. This study has found that the state has been particularly active in adopting and implementing measures to protect Romanian labour migrants abroad. However, if emigrants are potential entrepreneurs whose activities can generate productive economic cycles in addition to consumption, a mixed picture emerges. On the one hand, although private entrepreneurship is recognised as a key to economic development, the government's record in creating a positive environment for private initiatives remained problematic for most of the 1990s and 2000s; although it has improved over time, the regulatory framework has produced disincentives, encouraged petty corruption and negatively affected the enforcement of property rights. These suboptimal conditions are costly, especially for small entrepreneurs. On the other hand, potential entrepreneurs are offered several means to help them start a business. However, these programmes are not managed by a single authority, and it is not transparent whether the relevant information is channelled towards the groups most likely to benefit from it. The limited coordination between different agencies, the scattered information, and the absence of initiatives to bring together potential entrepreneurs suggest that the *laissez-faire* approach does not create pro-development synergies because it does not offer attractive alternatives to private consumption preferences. There is plenty of room for state actors to take a more active role in steering emigration into development, in particular at the local level – where interactions are closer and problems manageable. For the time being, however, neither local authorities nor emigrants have taken the initiative.



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