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Political behavior of Romanians with migration experience in France and Spain: particularities and transnational connections

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Introduction

The 2024 presidential elections marked a distinct moment in the political dynamics of the Romanian diaspora, highlighting both the persistence of sanctioning votes against traditional parties and a shift toward a candidate with a sovereigntist, nationalist, and Eurosceptic discourse, Călin Georgescu, who attracted a significant number of votes from abroad. A relevant precedent is the entry of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), a right-wing/far-right party, into the Romanian Parliament in the 2020 elections, supported by many Romanian voters living abroad. Whereas in previous elections the diaspora predominantly supported liberal and pro-European candidates and parties, the rise of nationalist options suggests a growing skepticism toward Western influence on migrants' political behavior.

The main objective of this thesis is to explore the relationship between migration experience and political behavior. Political behavior, in a broad sense, refers to the interaction between individuals and political or institutional structures, manifested through various forms of support and social practices. At the individual level, it reflects a complex process of shaping political attitudes and actions.

This study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors that have shaped the political attitudes and actions of Romanian emigrants, beginning with their decision to leave Romania and continuing through the circumstances that have influenced those attitudes and actions. Romanians in the diaspora represent a relevant case for studying political behavior in the context of migration, as recent social changes have increased their visibility on the public agenda, justifying an in-depth analysis of the dynamics behind their political attitudes and practices. One strong argument in this regard is the growing influence of the diaspora on the national political scene in Romania, evidenced by their involvement in several high-impact events. These include the 2014 Presidential Elections, which demonstrated massive voter mobilization abroad; the "Diaspora Protest" of August 10, 2018, organized in response to judicial reforms; and the 2019 European Parliament Elections, marked by significant participation from Romanians living outside the country. These episodes have contributed to the consolidation of the diaspora as a relevant actor in Romanian politics, reinforcing the need for a detailed analysis of their political behavior.

Political behavior in the context of migration: theoretical insights

Political behavior is a fundamental component of political life and the operational system of a state (Easton, 1957), directly influencing its structure and functionality. Collective actions that support an effective political system are determined by individual beliefs (Dahl, 1971), and these beliefs are deeply connected to how individuals perceive institutions, political actors, and processes, having a major impact on the stability and performance of the political system (Almond & Verba, 1963). This research is based both on general theories of political behavior and on specific approaches that examine this concept in the context of migration. The theoretical framework of the thesis is structured into two main subchapters: the first explores political behavior from a general conceptual perspective, while the second analyzes it in the context of migration, using interdisciplinary perspectives. The literature review in the first subchapter reveals that political behavior is influenced by both individual and external factors derived from the social environment. In the context of migration, the interaction between these two categories of factors becomes essential. At the individual level, traits such as identity, commitment, attachment, and belonging take on a distinct dynamic in relation to the two social environments: the country of origin and the destination country. These aspects are manifested through social interactions, group and network membership, as well as direct contact with public systems, institutions, and local authorities.

The complexity of the migration phenomenon can be understood through a three-dimensional approach: micro (individual), meso (relational/social), and macro (institutional/systemic). According to King (2002), the study of migration must consider both the individual life experiences of migrants and the social processes and transformations in the societies of origin and destination. This dual perspective is essential for understanding the impact of migration on political behavior and personal development.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model supports this approach, presenting the interaction between the individual and the different environments in which they live: family and friends (micro), social networks and communities (meso), and cultural values and institutions (macro). In the context of migration, these levels influence each other and contribute to the formation of political attitudes and behaviors among migrants. Other researchers, such as Castles and Miller (2003), emphasize the role of macrostructures (laws, policies, institutions) and microstructures (migrants' beliefs and networks) in shaping the

migration process. De Haas (2009) adds the meso level, highlighting the importance of local communities and daily interactions in the lives of migrants. This layered analysis provides a detailed picture of how migration affects not only individuals but also broader social and political structures.

Understanding political behavior in the context of migration requires an integrated analysis of these three dimensions. Solano (2021) proposes a similar framework, referring to institutional inclusion (macro), social inclusion (meso), and individual inclusion (micro). Through this approach, migrants are no longer viewed as passive actors, but as active participants who engage with and sometimes challenge the systems they live in, thereby influencing the social and political dynamics of the host countries.

This thesis deepens the analysis of the three dimensions: micro, meso, and macro by integrating them into the theoretical framework of transnationalism. According to Portes and his collaborators (1999), transnationalism involves complex interactions between individuals, their social networks, and institutional structures at the local and national levels. In this approach, the starting point is the individual, their previous activities, and the networks they are involved in, which are essential for understanding how transnational behaviors and influences manifest and affect social structures.

To illustrate how factors from the three dimensions interact and influence political behavior, the research explores several relevant theoretical references. These include transnationalism and its forms of manifestation, such as social and political remittances, the processes of political socialization and resocialization, and electoral participation across borders. Additionally, trust is addressed as an essential element in the relationship between individuals and the political system. These perspectives offer a solid analytical framework for understanding how migration transforms individuals' relationship with politics, both in their country of origin and in the host country.

Methodological Aspects

This study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how migration influences the formation and evolution of political attitudes and behaviors among Romanians who have left the country. At the core of this research is the relationship between migratory experience and political behavior, with a focus on the context of the emigration decision and the social

circumstances that shaped migrants' political attitudes. The study explores both individual influences and institutional and social network dynamics on political behavior in a transnational context.

To achieve this general objective, the research is structured around four specific goals: first, to analyze the social, cultural, and demographic factors that shape the political behavior of Romanian migrants (O1); second, to explore the process of social and political remittances through which migrants maintain transnational ties and influence (O2); third, to examine the electoral participation of Romanians in France and Spain in Romanian national elections (O3); and finally, to compare the perceived level of trust in institutions between the country of origin and the host country (O4).

To address these objectives, the study focuses on two case studies, targeting Romanian migrant communities in France and Spain. The theoretical approach integrates three levels of analysis: micro (identity, attachments, values), meso (social networks), and macro (institutional systems), offering a comprehensive interpretative framework. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. This choice is justified by the nature of the topic, which requires both a deep understanding of the political attitudes and behaviors of Romanian migrants and a contextual analysis based on electoral data and socio-demographic indicators. Thus, the combination of methods captures the subjective dimensions of political participation while grounding them in objective data.

The mixed-methods design was applied sequentially, starting with the collection of qualitative data through in-depth interviews, aiming to explore the phenomenon initially. Later, in the analysis phase, secondary quantitative data were incorporated to support the interpretations and offer a broader perspective. The qualitative data were collected through interviews conducted in France and Spain, providing a detailed perspective on individual migration experiences and their influence on political behavior. Complementarily, the quantitative component included statistical and electoral data, such as migration flows and national election results, used to contextualize and empirically validate the qualitative findings. This strategy, known as sequential exploratory design, is recommended by Creswell (2009) for studies investigating complex phenomena and has previously been successfully applied in the field of migration and politics (Vargas-Silva, 2012).

Following data collection and processing, the design of the two case studies, Spain and France, was outlined, each structured into four main sections: (1) the context of the destination countries (specific characteristics of the host societies); (2) migration experience (motivations for leaving, integration into the new society, and maintaining ties with Romania); (3) social perspectives (comparisons regarding public systems and trust in institutions); and (4) political participation (electoral results, experiences and perceptions of the electoral process, and a comparative analysis of the political situations in the country of origin and destination). These two case studies analyze the factors that influenced the political behavior of Romanian migrants in France and Spain, highlighting the specific characteristics of each community.

Results, Findings, and Conclusions

The analysis of migration experiences in the two case studies contributes to identifying several key factors relevant to the study of political behavior, such as the motivation for emigration, the integration process, and the maintenance of transnational ties with Romania. While economic reasons such as the search for better-paid jobs, predominate among Romanian emigrants in Spain, those in France are primarily motivated by education and professional aspirations. However, these differences are interconnected and rooted in shared dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities and social inequalities in Romania.

Regarding the integration of Romanians in Spain and France, the process has been shaped by common factors such as language acquisition, access to housing, and interaction with the local population. In Spain, language skills were acquired more easily through frequent workplace interactions, whereas in France, education and close social ties with locals played a central role in learning the language. Social networks consisting of other Romanian migrants were essential in facilitating access to housing, connecting newcomers with landlords and reducing the time needed to find accommodation. It is worth noting that, in France, the rental process is more bureaucratic and involves a high level of responsibility, a fact frequently mentioned in the interviews.

Concerning transnational ties, Romanians in both Spain and France maintain constant contact with people back home through socialization, information exchange, and the sharing of opinions, including political ones. A notable difference between the two communities is the stronger desire among Romanians in Spain to return to Romania, supported by a strong national

attachment and a pronounced sense of homesickness. This tendency can be explained by the longer period of residence, most interviewees in Spain have lived there for over 14 years. Owning property in Romania also plays a significant role, offering a stable return point. In contrast, the tendency to return is lower in France, as most migrants there have only recently integrated into the labor market and have professional aspirations that require long-term or even permanent residence.

The two case studies also examined political behavior through subchapters focusing on perceptions of public systems, trust in institutions, and views on the political class in Romania compared to those in Spain and France. Among the main sources of dissatisfaction with Romania are the poor quality of public services, particularly in healthcare and education (especially noted by Romanians in France), high levels of corruption, and poor governance. Although Romanian migrants do not idealize their host countries, they perceive the political systems in Spain and France as more efficient, with higher-quality public services, greater social equity, and lower tolerance for corruption.

The study also includes a subchapter on electoral participation in both case studies. Romanian emigrants in Spain and France expressed varied opinions regarding political options in presidential, parliamentary, and European elections. The general perception is marked by electoral uncertainty, driven by the ideological instability of political parties, dissatisfaction with previously elected candidates, and poorly organized elections. Many interviewees reported waiting in line for hours to vote, while others were unable to exercise this right due to logistical problems during the elections. Despite these challenges, the motivation to participate in Romanian elections remains strong. The desire for change, the improvement of living conditions for those who remain in Romania, and a sense of civic responsibility are key factors sustaining electoral engagement. Most interviewees reaffirmed their national identity, which they maintain regardless of their length of stay in the host countries.

To complement the analysis of electoral participation, the case studies reviewed the results of the last four presidential, parliamentary, and European elections. The data show a relative shift compared to previous elections, during which Romanians in both countries largely supported candidates with pro-European and liberal views. However, anti-establishment voting used to sanction traditional parties remains a constant trend. These changes reflect an emerging political dynamic in which Romanian emigrants may challenge Western influence on their

political behavior and promote a model rooted in national identity, though further research is needed to confirm this premise.

It is important to note that electoral data analysis indicates that right-wing parties and candidates with liberal and pro-European visions remain among the main choices of Romanians in Spain and France, reflecting the adoption and promotion of democratic values from the host countries. These values are disseminated both within Romanian diaspora communities and through sustained connections with those who remain in Romania.

The case studies highlight the complexity of political behavior in the context of migration. While there are similarities between Romanian emigrants in Spain and France in terms of socialization and opinion formation, each group shows unique characteristics influenced by the specific sample and the social dynamics of the host country. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of political behavior in migration contexts through findings that emphasize the essential role of transnational space in shaping political attitudes and actions. Romanian migrants transcend the boundaries of political and social perspectives from both their country of origin and their host country, integrating them into a shared framework. This process connects pre-migration political values and experiences with those acquired in the destination country. Access to information, socialization, comparison of political climates, and participation in elections form the foundation of these connections.

Despite its significant contributions to the study of Romanian migrants' political behavior, the research also has important limitations. From a methodological standpoint, the comparison between the two cases is challenging due to substantial differences in the sample, such as length of stay (longer in Spain than in France), education level (most respondents in France hold higher education degrees), and professional status (Romanians in France have more advanced careers). A future direction for research could include a deeper exploration of the dimensions analyzed such as motivation for emigration, integration, ties to Romania, social perspectives, and electoral participation. Furthermore, the development of more detailed theories could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

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