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DOCTORAL THESIS

THE ROMANIAN COMMUNITY IN AUSTRIA
Identity, Role, and Involvement in Bilateral Relations

ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: migration, intra-community mobility, socio-economic integration, Romanian community, European Union, constructivism, integration models, migration and integration policies, Romanian organizations, leadership, bilateral relations.

The enlargement of the European Union and the consolidation of the single market have amplified labour mobility and migration flows between member states. Intra-EU migration is a complex phenomenon, influenced by various economic, social, and political factors, with significant implications for European cohesion. Economic development disparities between Western and Eastern European countries, as well as labour market imbalances, have driven considerable migration flows, particularly from the new member states toward the more developed EU economies.

Migration from Romania to Austria intensified especially after Romania's accession to the EU in 2007, when Romanian citizens obtained EU member status. This status provided them with increased economic opportunities and access to Austria's social and economic systems. Beyond the economic contributions that this mobility brings to both countries, the process also poses a series of challenges related to social integration, inclusion policies, and migrants' rights. Some member states, including Austria, have adopted restrictive measures regarding mobile workers' access to social benefits, which has sparked European-level debates on the principle of equal treatment and the economic and social cohesion within the EU.

Intra-EU migration is not only a matter of economic mobility, but also a factor that influences bilateral relations between countries of origin and destination. The Romanian community in Austria, one of the largest in Western Europe, plays a significant role in this dynamic, impacting the labour market, social systems, and bilateral relations between the two countries. Thus, Romanian migration to Austria reflects both the challenges and opportunities of European policies regarding the free movement of people and the integration of migrants into host countries.

This paper aims to analyse the effects of Romanian migration to Austria and its implications in the context of European policies regarding mobility and migrant integration, adopting a constructivist perspective on identity and community belonging. The study examines the socio-economic integration process of Romanian migrants, exploring their access to education, the labour market, healthcare, and social services. A key element of the analysis is the role of the Romanian community in Austria, not only as an economic actor but also as a space for identity construction and social cohesion. The research investigates how community networks support migrants' adaptation,

contributing to the preservation of cultural identity, the development of social capital, and their interaction with the host society. The study highlights the influence of the Romanian community on bilateral relations between Romania and Austria, reflected in the dynamics of economic, social, and cultural exchanges between the two countries.

Chapter 1, “Research Methodology and Sources of Documentation”, presents the general methodological framework of the thesis, defining the directions of analysis, the tools used, and the theoretical foundations of the study. The objective of the research is to analyse the level of socio-economic integration of the Romanian community in Austria, the ways in which it preserves its cultural identity, and its contribution to the development of bilateral relations between Romania and Austria. To achieve this goal, the following research objectives were established:

1. *To evaluate the process and level of socio-economic integration of the Romanian community in Austria;*
2. *To analyse the role of Romanian associations in promoting cultural identity and supporting integration;*
3. *To investigate the role of the Romanian community in strengthening bilateral relations between Romania and Austria.*

Based on these objectives, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

1. *Socio-economic empowerment contributes to a high level of community integration.*
2. *The growth and consolidation of the church have played an essential role in community development, the preservation of linguistic identity, and the transmission of intergenerational cultural values.*
3. *The Romanian community plays an important role in fostering bilateral relations.*

These hypotheses are investigated through a mixed research design, which combines qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, case study) with quantitative methods (applied survey, statistical analysis).

The research is guided by the following research questions:

1. *How does the socio-economic integration process of the Romanian community in Austria influence the preservation of national identity?*
2. *How do Romanian associations in Austria contribute to the promotion of cultural identity and the support of social integration?*
3. *In what way does the Romanian community in Austria contribute to the strengthening of bilateral relations between Romania and Austria?*

The research activity is carried out at European, national, and regional levels, with a temporal focus mainly on the period 2021–2024, but it also includes earlier historical stages relevant to the formation and development of the community. The tools used include interviews with community and institutional leaders, questionnaires applied to a sample of 241 respondents, as well as the analysis of legislation, official documents, and statistical databases.

Chapter 2, “Migration and Integration, Identity and Status. Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis”, offers a detailed perspective on the phenomenon of migration, with a focus on fundamental concepts and relevant theories. The specialized bibliography is analysed from the perspective of economic, social, political, and legal aspects of migration and integration, both at the national level and within the EU context. Conceptual differences in the registration and classification of migrants are examined, highlighting discrepancies between countries of origin and host countries, with specific examples from Austria and Romania.

The first part of the chapter defines and analyses the concepts of migration, integration, and assimilation, each examined through various theoretical lenses and academic disciplines. It emphasizes the complexity of defining migration and the difficulty of establishing uniform international criteria. The concept of integration is analysed in relation to the academic literature, highlighting the stages and dimensions of the integration process. The concept of assimilation is also explored, with an emphasis on its differences from integration. Special attention is given to the EU’s approach to migration and integration, analysing the evolution of EU policies and their impact on migration flows.

The second part of the chapter examines migration theories. Classical theories focusing on economic and geographical drivers of mobility are analysed, along with neoclassical theories, which explain migration through economic development and wage disparities. Contemporary theories are also explored, including approaches to transnational migration, social networks, and the effects of globalization. These theories provide a conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon of migration, emphasizing the role of economic, institutional, and social structures.

The final part of the chapter analyses the constructivist perspective on migration, highlighting the role of identity and social norms in the integration process. The Romanian community in Austria is presented as a case study to illustrate how cultural factors, language, values, and associative structures influence both the integration process and the preservation of national identity. The development of support networks and interaction with the host society are analysed, with emphasis on how social norms and perceptions affect the status of migrants.

Chapter 3, “Migration and Integration Policy. Rights and Obligations of Foreign Nationals”, offers a detailed analysis of the legislative, institutional, and political framework regulating migration and integration within the European Union, with a particular focus on Austria. The chapter examines the evolution of policies in this field, the rights and obligations of migrants, and the mechanisms of socio-economic integration. It also analyses how the Austrian state manages migration flows and integration processes, with an emphasis on the implemented structures and policies.

The first part addresses the issue of migration within the EU, highlighting the challenges and strategic directions adopted at the community level. It examines policies related to economic migration, refugee protection, and measures to combat illegal migration, as well as their effects on member states. The role of the EU in managing migration flows is presented through legislative initiatives and support tools for migrant integration.

The second part analyses the political, legal, and institutional environment in Austria, providing a detailed overview of the legislation and institutions that regulate migration and integration. It explores the current legal framework, highlighting the regulations regarding migrants’ access, their rights and obligations, and the differences between asylum seekers and foreign nationals with residency rights. Key institutions and organisations involved in migration management are presented, emphasizing their role in policy enforcement and integration program implementation.

The third part of the chapter explores the evolution of Austria’s migration and integration policy, analysing the changes that occurred before and after EU accession. It highlights how Austria regulated migration in the pre-accession period through restrictive measures and migrant selection based on economic criteria. Following EU accession, migration policy was adjusted in line with community norms, and migrant integration became a priority in public policy.

The fourth part explores general aspects of migration and integration policy, focusing on the mechanisms by which migrants are either accepted or rejected. It analyses the criteria for granting residence, entry procedures, migration control, and repatriation policies applied to those who do not meet the residence conditions. These aspects reflect the balance between openness to immigration and the restrictive measures adopted to maintain control over migration flows.

The final part of this chapter is dedicated to the methods and tools used for migrant integration, addressing the various models applied to facilitate the integration process. It examines migrants’ access to education, vocational training, the labour market, and the healthcare system, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities they encounter. The initiatives of the state and non-

governmental organizations in supporting migrants are discussed, with a focus on the importance of educational programs and employment policies.

Chapter 4, “The Stages of Formation of the Romanian Community in Austria”, analyses the historical, political, and social processes that shaped and consolidated this community within the Austrian territory. The analysis highlights the formation of the Romanian community in Austria in close connection with major geopolitical events in Romania and Europe, as well as with Austrian migration legislation, emphasizing the role of the fall of communism, Romania’s accession to the EU, and the lifting of labour market restrictions.

The first part of the chapter offers a chronological analysis of Romanian migration to Austria, structured into three main periods: the pre-1990 period, the pre-accession period (1990–2006), and the post-accession period. Each timeframe reflects a specific evolution of migration flows, influenced by factors such as the communist regime and mobility restrictions, external economic opportunities, and ultimately, the rights granted by EU citizenship. The analysis emphasizes that each period was marked by different mechanisms of emigration and integration, ranging from political asylum seeking to labour migration and family reunification.

The second part of the chapter analyses the geopolitical and political events that played a decisive role in the formation of the community. Five major moments are highlighted: the fall of the political regime in Romania, Austria’s accession to the EU, the granting of free movement rights to Romanians within the EU, Romania’s EU accession, and finally, the full liberalization of access to the Austrian labour market. Each of these milestones is correlated with relevant statistical data, demonstrating both immediate and long-term effects on the size and structure of the Romanian community. The most relevant geopolitical factors that decisively influenced the formation and development of the Romanian community in Austria are the fall of the communist regime in Romania, which generated an intense but short-lived migration wave, and Romania’s accession to the EU, which triggered a continuous migration flow, supported by extended mobility and gradual access to EU rights.

The third part of the chapter presents a demographic and geographic analysis of the community. Based on data provided by official Austrian institutions, it describes the distribution of the Romanian-origin population across Austria. A significant concentration is observed in four regions: Vienna, Lower Austria, Upper Austria, and Styria, which attract over 80% of all Romanians in the country. These regions have become the main hubs for Romanian migration due to their strong economic potential and well-developed administrative infrastructure.

The final part of the chapter includes a case study focused on the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria (Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes), analysed as a form of community organization with religious, social, and identity-building roles within the Romanian community in Austria. The evolution of this micro-community is traced from its establishment in 1984, during the first waves of migration, up to 2022, when it gathered over 17,000 members and 48 places of worship, distributed according to the geographic settlement of Romanian populations. The church is approached as a space of social cohesion, cultural mediation, and ethno-religious identity consolidation, contributing to the integration process by preserving language and traditional values. In conclusion, the analysis highlights the correlation between the geographic distribution of places of worship and the demographic distribution of the Romanian community, reflecting the Pentecostal Church's capacity to adapt to community needs. It no longer functions solely as a religious space but emerges as an integrative institution, supporting community cohesion and cultural identity preservation, while also contributing to the strengthening of bilateral relations between Romania and Austria.

Chapter 5, “The Contemporary Romanian Community”, offers a comprehensive and structured analysis of the current realities of the Romanian community in Austria, focusing on internal organization, forms of leadership, economic and social integration, as well as the community's relevance in bilateral relations.

The first part of the chapter presents community organizations, which play an essential role in preserving and promoting cultural values. Among them are artistic groups that organize performances, events, and publications aimed at supporting the Romanian language and building bridges between Romanian and Austrian cultures. Various social organizations also carry out charitable initiatives and provide assistance to vulnerable groups, both in Austria and Romania, strengthening ties between communities and facilitating social integration. Religious structures also play a special role, functioning as centres of community cohesion, contributing to social integration and the preservation of cultural identity. Romanian-language mass media are key to informing and connecting community members, providing a communication platform and promoting culture and traditions.

The second part of the chapter is dedicated to individuals who, through their activities, contribute to the affirmation and promotion of the Romanian community in Austria. Highlighted are individuals with an impact in economic, cultural, religious, and social fields, who act as role models for the Romanian community in Austria. These include entrepreneurs involved in social services, cultural promoters such as directors or writers, religious leaders active in youth integration and spiritual development, as well as public figures engaged in inclusion and social responsibility projects.

These examples illustrate the diversity of individual engagement and the positive impact community leaders can have both on the community itself and on its perception within the host society.

The third part of the chapter analyses economic and social integration, highlighting key characteristics of the Romanian community, its labour market participation, access to education and social services, and members' perceptions of life in Austria. The study is based on official statistical data, correlated with the results of a custom survey conducted within the Romanian community, aimed at providing a detailed picture of the level of socio-economic integration.

The economic integration of the Romanian community in Austria is supported by a significant and consistent presence in the labour market, with Romanians having an average age of just 31.4 years, making them one of the youngest and most active foreign communities in the country. According to official data, over 75% of Romanians residing in Austria are under 44 years old, representing a vital resource for the local economy. Their employment rate of 70.4% is higher than that of other foreign communities, though slightly lower than that of the native Austrian population. Romanians stand out through both their active labour market participation and entrepreneurial spirit, being the most active foreign business founders in Vienna in 2022.

Social and educational integration is reflected in the active participation of Romanian children and youth in the Austrian education system, from preschool to university level. In the 2021–2022 school year, Romanian ranked among the most common mother tongues in Austrian schools, and Romanian children benefit from optional Romanian language classes. A large share pursues secondary or vocational education, and 1,499 Romanian students attend Austrian universities, ranking 10th among foreign nationalities. The educational level among Romanians shows a predominance of those who have completed high school or vocational education, with 19% holding academic degrees. German language proficiency is well developed within the community, contributing to stable educational and social integration. In terms of belonging and lifestyle, Romanians tend to adopt a hybrid model that blends their cultural roots with Austrian values, with the second generation showing a strong orientation toward integration.

The survey conducted within the community confirms these observations, offering a subjective but essential perspective on the direct experiences of Romanians in Austria. Results show that 75% of respondents are professionally active, and most have at least a high school level of education. Language skills are well developed, with over 70% reporting good or very good proficiency in speaking, reading, and understanding German. Association membership is high, especially in religious and educational organisations, and feelings of discrimination are rare or occasional. In terms of

lifestyle, most respondents say they combine Romanian and Austrian values and customs. 40% express a clear intention to remain permanently in Austria, while only 7% intend to return to Romania, with the rest undecided. This distribution of preferences suggests, from a subjective standpoint, a high level of social and economic integration.

In conclusion, the chapter examines bilateral relations between Romania and Austria, highlighting the role of the Romanian community in this context. The Romanian community in Austria has become a significant actor in strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries, both due to its demographic size and its socio-economic and cultural contributions. This role has led to active involvement from the Romanian state, which, through institutions such as the Department for Romanians Abroad (DRP), the Romanian Embassy in Vienna, the Romanian Cultural Institute, and consulates in Austria, supports community integration, cultural identity preservation, and the promotion of Romanian interests in the host country.

Simultaneously, the Austrian state, through the Integration Department within the Federal Chancellery, acknowledges the importance of the Romanian community, especially in essential fields such as elderly care and social services. This recognition is increasingly visible in the actions of Austrian institutions, which appreciate the contributions of Romanians to the country's social and cultural life. A tangible example is the "Gemeinsam Sicher – Together in Safety" project, initiated by the Vienna Police, which aims to strengthen trust and cooperation with Romanian community members through direct communication and public safety awareness initiatives.

This institutional openness is also supported by positive attitudes at the local level. A notable example is the statement of Ms. Elke Kahr, Mayor of Graz, who emphasized the successful integration of the approximately 10,000 Romanians living in the city. Similarly, Mr. Mag. Andreas Bardeau, Honorary Consul of Romania in the federal state of Styria, highlights the essential role of Romanians in addressing labour shortages. He also actively promotes the positive image of the community and is firmly engaged in supporting Romania's interests.

Thus, the Romanian community in Austria contributes not only to the internal dynamics of the host country but also to the positive image of Romania abroad. It serves as a factor of cohesion and stability, as well as a catalyst for bilateral cooperation, reflecting a model of active integration and strategic partnership between two EU member states.

Chapter 6, "Conclusions", summarizes the main findings of the research on the integration of the Romanian community in Austria, the theoretical and practical contributions of the study, the validation of the proposed hypotheses and objectives, as well as the identified limitations. The

research confirms that the integration of the Romanian community in Austria is a complex and multidimensional process, with an upward trajectory marked by a balanced dynamic between adaptation to the host society and the preservation of national identity.

Romanians in Austria demonstrate a high level of socio-economic integration, with 81.6% being economically active and an employment rate of 70.4%, higher than that of other migrant groups. The majority of respondents reported good knowledge of the German language (approx. 80%), which facilitates access to employment, education, and social interaction. However, integration does not imply the loss of cultural identity. On the contrary, the Romanian language is preserved within families, in schools (where it is offered as an optional subject), and in churches, which serve as spiritual, educational, and social support pillars. Community networks formed around churches and associations offer support to newcomers and ease their socio-professional integration. Migrants' children tend to develop a hybrid identity, navigating between Romanian and Austrian cultures—an aspect that reflects the specific dynamics of the integration process.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in validating the constructivist theory of migrant identity, which sees identity not as fixed, but as the result of ongoing interaction between origin culture and host society. Furthermore, the application of economic and transnational migration theories confirms that Romanian migration to Austria is a complex process driven by economic, cultural, social, and emotional factors. Migrant identity is hybrid, and integration does not mean assimilation, but a negotiated adaptation in which language, religion, cultural values, and social belonging coexist.

The practical contribution of the research consists in proposing concrete directions for action: harmonizing migrant registration procedures between Romania and Austria, strengthening Romanian-language educational programs, supporting transnational cultural initiatives, and expanding collaboration among authorities, NGOs, and churches. The study offers a model of balanced and functional integration, where the preservation of cultural identity is compatible with active participation in the social and economic life of the host country.

The research aimed to analyse the level of socio-economic integration of the Romanian community in Austria, the ways in which it preserves its cultural identity, and its role in strengthening bilateral relations between Romania and Austria. Accordingly, the study was structured around three main objectives:

1. *Assessing the integration process of Romanians into Austrian society, with a focus on access to the labour market, education, and social interaction;*

2. *Analysing the contribution of Romanian associations, churches, and organizations in Austria to cultural identity preservation and integration support;*
3. *Identifying the ways in which the Romanian community influences bilateral relations.*

The results obtained from the research confirm the achievement of these objectives. Regarding the first objective, data collected from both official sources and the author's own survey indicate an advanced level of socio-economic integration of the Romanian community. An employment rate of 70.4% and a figure of 81.6% of economically active Romanians demonstrate a strong integration into the labour market. The majority of respondents reported having good or very good German language skills, and the high level of satisfaction with professional life, access to services, and income levels suggests a successful adaptation to Austria's economic environment. Integration into the educational system is confirmed by the growing number of Romanian students in schools, as well as the availability of Romanian language classes as an optional subject. These findings point to a stable and multidimensional integration process.

The second objective focused on the role of Romanian associations in promoting culture and facilitating integration. The research confirmed that these organizations significantly contribute to the preservation of Romanian language, traditions, and values, as well as to the adaptation of newcomers. The case study on the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria highlights its active support through courses, counselling, educational and religious programs in Romanian. These initiatives help preserve cultural identity while also supporting integration into the host society.

With regard to the third objective, the results indicate a significant contribution of the Romanian community to the strengthening of bilateral relations between Romania and Austria. Romanians in Austria are active in the field of entrepreneurship, being the community that established the highest number of companies in Vienna in 2022. They also cover key segments of the labour market, particularly in the care sector and social services. Remittances sent to Romania support the home country's economy, while Austria is one of the main foreign investors in Romania. On a cultural level, the organization of festivals, exhibitions, and Romanian language courses contributes to promoting Romania's image in Austria and to enhancing intercultural dialogue. Austrian authorities, such as the Federal Chancellery and the mayor of Graz, have expressed appreciation for the contribution of the Romanian community. The favourable position of Mr. Andreas Bardeau, Honorary Consul of Romania in Styria, who consistently promotes the image of the community, further highlights the community's positive role in bilateral cooperation.

Based on the results obtained, the three research questions formulated received well-founded answers. The first question, concerning how socio-economic integration influences the preservation of national identity, was confirmed: Romanians are well integrated professionally and educationally while continuing to maintain their language and culture through churches, associations, and educational initiatives.

The second research question, which focuses on the contribution of Romanian associations to the process of social integration and the promotion of cultural identity, was also confirmed through the analysis of the activities carried out by these entities. Romanian associations in Austria have proven to be active and consistent actors in supporting migrants, providing them with logistical, social, and informational assistance, especially during the transition and adaptation period. By organizing cultural events, educational activities, and programs dedicated to preserving the Romanian language and traditions, these organizations contribute to strengthening community cohesion. In this context, Romanian churches play a central role, functioning not only as spaces for spiritual and religious support but also as true community centres, where educational, social, and cultural activities are carried out, reinforcing identity ties and facilitating integration into Austrian society.

The third research question, concerning the influence of the Romanian community on bilateral relations between Romania and Austria, is supported by a series of significant contributions made by the diaspora in various fields. The economic involvement of Romanians in Austria, highlighted by their active participation in the labour market and the entrepreneurial spirit demonstrated by the large number of businesses established, has strengthened the economic ties between the two countries. At the same time, numerous cultural initiatives carried out by the community have contributed to promoting Romania's image in the Austrian public sphere and fostering intercultural dialogue. Additionally, the active diplomatic engagement of community leaders and Romanian and Austrian institutions supports and acknowledges the positive role of the Romanian community in Austria's social and economic life.

The hypotheses formulated in the research are also confirmed by the analyses conducted. The first hypothesis, that socio-economic empowerment significantly contributes to the integration of the Romanian community in Austria, is supported by data showing a high employment rate, strong German language proficiency, and a high level of participation in both the educational system and community associations.

The second hypothesis, which states that the church plays an essential role in the development of the community and in the preservation of cultural identity, is validated by the findings from the

case study on the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria. This religious institution functions not only as a spiritual space but also as a community centre offering emotional, educational, and social support. Activities conducted in the Romanian language, along with programs dedicated to children and youth, contribute to the transmission of cultural values and the strengthening of community cohesion.

The third hypothesis, that the Romanian community plays an active role in the development of bilateral relations between Romania and Austria, is supported by the significant economic involvement of Romanians, particularly in key sectors of the Austrian labour market, by cultural initiatives that promote Romanian identity and intercultural dialogue, by the ongoing support of community leaders and official representatives, as well as by the recognition expressed by Austrian authorities. Together, these aspects demonstrate that the Romanian community is not merely a demographic presence, but a relevant and influential actor in strengthening the relations between the two countries.

Finally, the research acknowledges several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Among the most relevant are limited access to up-to-date institutional data, difficulties in obtaining comprehensive information about community initiatives, and the degree of subjectivity reflected in some individual responses. These methodological constraints may partially affect the overall comprehensiveness of the analysis. Building on these findings, several useful directions emerge for future research, which could benefit from the use of mixed methodologies, closer collaboration with relevant institutions in both Romania and Austria, and the adoption of longitudinal approaches capable of capturing, in depth, the evolving dynamics of the Romanian community's integration process. Such future investigations could contribute to strengthening the theoretical and practical framework in the fields of migration, identity, and integration studies.

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