

Remigration, Identity, and Adjustment¹

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Abstract: Migration generates well-being for individuals and communities, but the pursuit of well-being is not without risks. Tens of thousands of Romanian children are affected by the migration of their parents, others have to cope with the effects of their own migration. Should migrants have difficulties adjusting when returning “home”? Is readjustment even possible for all remigrants, without support? The article aims to present some issues that the remigrants are confronted with when trying to readjust to their communities of origin. The article shows how readjustment is influenced by the social image, which in turn influences the social support for their adjustment and subsequent development.

Keywords: remigration, identity, adjustment, social image, social support

Seen as a positive aspect generating advantages for the individual, for the country of origin and for the country of destination (a „triple win”), migration or labor mobility, as it is has been referred to by the European Union institutions, has been supported through a complex legal framework and a variety of active measures (funding programs for facilitating employment abroad, ensuring the access to benefits deriving from legal employment throughout the Union, developing the capacity of institutions in charge of tackling exploitation or cross-border organized crime etc.). Migration is associated with well-being, and in order to access that well-being, sometimes risks need to be taken.

Today’s society is a risk society. As Ulrich Beck showed, risk is only generated by activities which produce well-being. The more extensive the production of well-being, the more extensive the „production” of risks. Of great importance, Beck warned, are the ways in which unforeseen risks (hazards) are prevented, minimized and removed (Beck 2009).

The migration wave which started in Eastern Europe after 1989 generated a multitude of opportunities as well as problems, some unforeseen or underestimated, both by the migrants themselves and by the Governments. In their pursuit of happiness nobody is exempt from risks: the communities or their members – adults or children. But the phenomena involved in this process are “objective, within the logic of transition from one type of civilization to another” (Miftode 2006, 4), representing a constitutive part in the evolution of societies.

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The particular case of the Romanian transition (which included many outcomes born from the newly discovered freedom of movement) was not spared from both positive and negative effects.

Although the subject of mobility for labor is not new in Romania, particularly after 1989, when most studies on the phenomenon were conducted, its effects on the “children left behind” and the readjustment issues that the migrant families and children go through when returning home are approached less.

Estimates such as that of UNICEF and Alternative Sociale showed that in 2008, in Romania, there were over 350.000 children with one or both parents working abroad (approximately 126.000 were separated from both parents) (UNICEF and Alternative Sociale, 2008). Although they showed figures much below the ones from the independent researches, official data still depicted a situation of worrying dimensions.

Another research (Luca et al. 2012), using statistics from the Romanian Ministry of Education, concluded on the existence of a reflux of migrants related to labor migration. Over 21.000 children, returning from Italy and Spain, applied to be reinstated in the Romanian education system between 2008-2012, after having spent at least 6 months abroad. The study estimated that, in fact, the total number of remigrant² children exceeded 33.000 (Luca et al. 2012).

In his “Foreword” to the study *The Remigration of Romanian Children: 2008-2012*, Șerban Ionescu explains: “the freedom to travel in Europe, in the entire world, to work abroad, something which the Romanian people could benefit from starting with December 1989, is a right of an extraordinary value, and yet (...) changes, even the positive ones, may have unexpected and sometimes harmful effects.” (Luca et al 2012, 5) Against all expectations of an easy reintegration in a familiar cultural, social, educational context, a significant part of these children (20-30%) presented a significant/high risk of developing disorders from the prosocial spectrum (such as emotional, conduct disorders, hyperactivity/inattention or peer relationship difficulties). Almost 30% of the children participating in the study had been “left behind” (the children had spent a period of time when they were not in the care of their parents) prior to the family reunification abroad. In the case of these children three contexts overlap, each of them involving major risks with regards to development: the first separation (“children left behind”), the emigration and the remigration (Luca et al. 2012, 26).

The study conducted by Alternative Sociale showed that, between 2008-2012, the number of children returning was of approximately 4000 children per year, with a peak in 2009, when over 7000 children returned home. The study also estimated that, on a short and medium term, the number of children “with

² Remigrant children are children which have spent a period of time abroad with the purpose of living there (as opposed to going on vacation) (Luca et al. 2012).

serious emotional and psychological issues caused by un-assisted migration will grow” with 1200-1400 children per year (Luca et al. 2012, 13).

Social image and readjustment

As shown before, a phenomenon which overlapped with the situation of children separated from their parents working abroad was the remigration of children. Seeing migration as an opportunity for development (access to better schools, learning a new language, developing a broader vision of the world or family members living together), and as a solution for averting or at least mitigating possible risks (when caregivers from the country of origin were no longer effective in exerting their authority, when the psychological effects of separation took their toll on the children etc.), many parents decided to take their children along. At some point and for a variety of reasons – economic difficulties, adjustment issues, decision of the family to return to the country of origin – the children remigrated (sometimes with, sometimes without their parents). In many cases (20-30%) this solution is actually generating other problems in the country of origin, the most challenging being those related to readjustment and social reintegration. These problems concern not only the children and their parents but also the communities that they are returning to.

The way in which the individual relates to the group (but also the way in which the group treats the individual) affects the level and quality of his/her participation to the life of the respective group. Is the community interested in the returning members? Are they seen as having a positive influence, or as bringing a contribution to the wellbeing of its members? Is the community aware of the positives and of the negatives of the situation of the remigrant children? Is the community willing to make the necessary effort to facilitate their adjustment and integration? These are questions that need to be answered before considering policies for the integration of remigrants.

The opinions on this subject seem to be divided, at least in theory. There may be a “social polarization in communities affected by external migration, between families of migrants, increasingly rich (...) and the families of non-migrants, poor or getting poorer. Psychologically, a reaction of non-migrants against migrants appeared, the latter being labeled and devalued” (Miftode 2006, 4). At the same time, the non-migrants know how dependent they are on the money the migrant workers send home.

The study *The Remigration of Romanian Children: 2008-2012* showed that the factors which, according to the remigrant children, had a positive influence on their adjustment are mainly individual (being accustomed to the life in Romania, trust in their own strength, ability to seek help, courage, capacity to make decisions, responsibility, luck), followed by family (care and help) and community factors (colleagues, teachers, neighbors). When referring to factors which made adjustment difficult or even impossible, children also named individual factors (having got used to the life abroad, having forgotten the

Romanian lifestyle, lack of confidence, lack of ability to ask for help, lack of courage, lack of capacity to make their own decisions etc.), followed by community factors (lack of support from friends, from colleagues and teachers) and family factors (overburdening, insufficient parental support, absence of parents etc.) (Luca et al. 2012).

The image of the family about the community of origin is influenced by the way in which the two entities related to each other when the family decided to migrate. The quality of the rapport between the family and the society or the community of origin (the level of integration, cooperation, trust etc.) influences the individuals' capacity to readjust when returning (Miftode, 2006).

Social identity and social image

The adjustment of the individual depends on a multitude of internal and external factors. A central concept in approaching the adjustment of remigrant children and their families is "identity." The relevance of the concept is given by its importance in the analysis of the individual's capacity to adjust (who needs to "determine" who he/she is in order to exist and to function) and when discussing the link between the individual and the environment that he or she already belongs to or aims to belong to. "Identity" is central when discussing another important concept, that of "resilience," which draws from what the individual "is," "has," and "can."³

The environment investigated in this article is the community, defined by three important dimensions: the geographical dimension (neighborhood, social interactions in a given space), the behavioral dimension (acts of will and practical action), and the identity dimension (on territorial as well as on non-territorial criteria – age, gender, ethnicity, religion – Gavriluță 2003, 548-549). All these dimensions are relevant in a discussion on migration, in the context in which remigrants go through changes that are geographical, behavioral and identity related.

In the context of migration, "identity" is a "classic" issue, and the greatest danger concerning the adjustment of migrants is an "identity crisis." (Mahovscaia 2007)

³ The concept of 'resilience' is still a matter of debate, and a unique and universally accepted definition of resilience is not available. There is, however, an agreement on two essential aspects: firstly, resilience characterizes a person who lived or still lives a traumatic event or a chronic adversity and makes the proof of a good adjustment (which may mean different things depending on his/her age and his/her socio-cultural environment), and secondly, resilience is the result of an interactive process involving a person, his/her family, and environment (Ionescu 2011). Specialists usually differentiate between "natural resilience" (built on individual characteristics and on intrafamilial interactions) and "assisted" resilience (developed with the support of mental health professionals) (Ionescu 2011). Resilience depends on internal factors (genes, temperament, attitude, motivation) and on external factors (relations with the members of the community, level of well-being, cultural and political elements) (Luca et al., 2012)

The problem of the identity of individuals and groups is approached by a series of theories (the social identity theory – Tajfel and Turner 1979, the social identification theory – Turner et al. 1987) that provide models explaining the relations between the individuals and the "social worlds that they live in." "Identity is not something which belongs to the individual, like a set of traits, but something resulting from the interaction with the environment, when cultural elements are activated, allowing the individual to comply with the behavior norms of the group. The way in which the individual is seen by the others in the particular social context becomes a major determinant in defining his identity." (Avanza and Laferté 2005)

According to Stephen Reicher "social identity places an accent on dynamics, on change, on the context and on the contents of social categories as well as on the role of culture and of history in building social categories." (cf. Markova 2007, 221-222; see Reicher 2004) "Cultural, societal, institutional, environmental, and symbolic factors play a part in the sense of identity and identification that individuals experience." (Joffe 2007, 198).

The francophone literature nuances the concept of "identity" on the basis of, among others, locus, defining it through the complementary concepts of "social image," "affiliation," and "identification" (Avanza and Laferté 2005, 140). None of these concepts overlap perfectly with the concept of "identity," but they complement each other.

"Affiliation" is internal, even though it depends on the individual's socialization, on his or her relation with a group. It is a definition of the self, an attempt to internalize attributes, images belonging to the social institutions that the individual participates to (Avanza and Laferté 2005).

"Identification" is external, it involves a process and not a state. It is continuously re-invented and redefined (Avanza and Laferte 2005) and includes any "social action where the identity attribution is external, exerted on an individual, within a social institution, based on a coded technique." (Avanza and Laferté 2005, 140-142) "Identification" is therefore bureaucratic, technical.

The concept of "social image," placed outside the individual as well, refers to social productions (discourses, symbols or other representations), belonging to a certain space (a certain community, society) and to a certain moment (Avanza and Laferté 2005). These involve labels that are sometimes accepted by an individual or a group. Based on the quality of these labels (positive, appreciative or negative, destructive) the individual or the group adapts, integrates, or quite the opposite, lives their own drama. In some situations the subjects of these productions refuse the label imposed and fight stereotypes, trying to impose their own image – through education or conflict.

Claude Levi-Strauss sees "identity" as a "virtual home that we need to refer to in order to explain certain things, which do not have a real existence." (Levi-Strauss 1977) As a consequence, "identity" is not seen as finality, it is not a process, it is a source or a reference.

“Identity” is important. At the same time “the fight with regards to the ethnic or regional identity – in other words with regards to properties (stigmas or signs) associated with the place of origin and with its associated durable consequences, such as the accent – are a particular case of the diverse fights for classifications, the monopoly of the power to make people see and believe, to know and acknowledge, to impose the legitimate definition of the division of the social world and, thus, to make or undo groups.” (Bourdieu 1992)

The social image and the readjustment of remigrants

The concept of “social image” has a special relevance in explaining social phenomena and developing intervention models.

As shown before, “social image” is not a static concept, it is not limited exclusively to recording perceptions of particular situations, produced at a certain moment or period. The “social image” is actively manifesting itself through its products, whether positions (discourses) or symbols which have the capacity to influence the crystallization of the identity and the functionality of the individual or of the group targeted (particularly in the case when they are vulnerable, such as the case of migrants or of children).

“Social image” is a way of interaction between the individual and the dominant group or between the individual and the community in which he or she tries to integrate. In the case of children, this interaction is even stronger because, according to Lev. S. Vygotsky, social interaction plays a fundamental role in their process of cognitive development: “every function in the child’s ... development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapyschological).” (Vygotsky 1978, 57) “Identity implies family and cultural roots, but also self-acknowledgement through own social image and through the others’ feedback. (...) The problems related to individual and cultural identity are in the center of the difficulties encountered by the immigrant adolescent, particularly by that who has lived in the country of immigration from a young age.” (Marcelli 2003, 503-509)

The interaction of the individual with the community must not be regarded unidirectionally, in the sense that it is only the community who influences the individual (although the individual’s attitudes are determined both by the personal convictions and the interpersonal network of communications and contacts) (Liu and László 2007, 95). The participation or the presence of an individual in a community is influenced by the social status of the latter. In today’s world, characterized by an increasing access to transnational opportunities, in the context of the multiplication of (and increased access to) models for achieving life goals, the replacement of a society which does not offer what the individual desires with another one, perceived as more advantageous, is a real and practical alternative option. The very survival of the weaker community is seriously put to the test (Şerban 2013). A relevant

example is the migration of highly qualified Romanian medical personnel or of construction workers after 1989. At the opposite end is the situation of the IT professionals who found in Romania an ideal framework for professional and personal growth.

The “social image” influences both the individual and the community. A reciprocal positive image is the ideal situation, because it provides the premise for building “social support”. At the opposite end, a negative “social image” may be identified as a major cause for adjustment difficulties, due to lack of “social support.” Just as damaging is a neutral “social image” (“I don’t care/I am not interested” or “I do not know” type of attitude).

Following the “social support” approach, the theoretical models that explain the process are based on two important dimensions: a structural dimension (which includes the support network and the frequency of social interactions) and a functional dimension (which includes the emotional component – emotional support, empathy and the instrumental component – the practical support, including charity and social, medical or legal services). Although both dimensions are important, the functional one provides better predictors (the quality of relations) about “social support” than the structural one (the quantity of relations) (Joyce 2010, 58-59).

Among the factors that affect the “social image,” and often the “social support,” language is particularly relevant. In the case of remigrants the language may be characterized by a different accent than the one of the community of origin, through improper use of certain words or through the substitution of certain words from the native language with words from the language of the country of migration. These types of elements constitute (superficial) means of identification of a person as belonging or not to the majority group, respectively as belonging to a minority group (Joyce 2010, Nash 1996, 58). In the case of remigrants, language is a “familiar” means and cause for labeling (the Romanian remigrant is called “foreigner” in Italy and “Italian” in Romania).

A study on the reintegration of Irish remigrants showed that the relationship between them and the members of the community is contradictory (Ni Laoire 2008). They are expected to have no problem reintegrating into the Irish society but at the same time they are regarded as not being true Irishmen, particularly when they are not born in Ireland (Ni Laoire 2008). Irish remigrants speak always of their belonging to the community of origin, about the family left in the country, but they are aware that they do not belong to that space, remaining fixated between two worlds. On one hand they have strong connections with the space of origin (they are *insiders*) but on the other their identity is marked by their migration experience, which affects negatively their integration (they are also *outsiders*) (Ni Laoire 2007, 341). The vulnerable individuals and groups, particularly the ones that see themselves as outsiders, may have difficulties in feeling that they belong to the community, and,

consequently, difficulties in developing and implementing integration plans. The fact that they are Irish is not enough, their identity has to be acknowledged by the community of origin (the *significant others*) before they are assimilated (Joyce 2010, 64).

In the case of Romanian remigrants, belonging to the community of origin is something to be proud of, when, while abroad, they do not wish to be integrated in the community of migration. When they return home they always make comparisons with the society from the country of migration, which they consider to be superior and which they value, although, when they speak of the reasons for remigration, they mention the superior quality of the Romanian education system (Luca et al. 2012).

The economic contribution of migrants to the well-being of the members of the community of origin is undeniable, both from the perspective of the central administration (all Romanian Governments, for instance, recognized the importance of the billions of euro sent home by migrant workers in balancing the Romanian economy) and from a local perspective (the migrants invest in the local economy, particularly through acquisition of services, or goods but also have a contribution in the cultural development of the communities). The return into the community of origin, often economically motivated (Luca et al. 2012), may be associated with a perception of failure, which can generate a negative label and may affect the social image of remigrants.

The cultural capital – the language, including the accent, the behavior, the clothes etc. as “surface pointers” (Joyce 2010, Nash 1996, 24-25) – is an attribute which may represent a social advantage or disadvantage (Joyce 2010, 66). In the case of Romanian migrants the clothing style of the country of migration may represent an advantage if they are valued or employed in the community of origin. Such pointers may also be interpreted as a resistance to integrate or as an aggression by the members of the community of origin, leading to a situation in which the cultural capital is a barrier and a factor destabilizing the social support.

The study conducted by Alternative Sociale indicates other factors which influence the social image of remigrants and implicitly their adaptation (Luca et al. 2012). Even the attempts performed by the communities of remigrants with the purpose of maintaining their ethnic identity may have negative influences on their capacity to adjust when they return home. The form of “Irishness” of the migrants differs from the original one, it is a “diasporic Irishness” (Joyce 2010, 68). The study on the situation of Romanian children conducted by Alternative Sociale indicates that the presence of a strong Romanian community in the country of migration facilitates the readjustment to the community of origin. However, the positive effect of this factor decreases with the increase of the period of time spent abroad (the percentage of children who experience adjustment difficulties is significantly higher among the group of children who have spent more than 3 years abroad).

An assumption supported, apparently, by common sense is that remigrants should not have adjustment difficulties or that these difficulties should be minor, negligible, because in their case the cultural elements of the community of origin (such as language) are already well-known. This assumption is shared by the community and the remigrants themselves (Gaw 2000, Mooradian 2004). In reality, when individuals return to their community of origin, especially after having spent a long time abroad they discover that "home" is not the same well-known place and that even the family and friends have changed (Luca et al. 2012). A "reverse cultural shock" takes place, after which, according to several studies (Adler 1981, Storti 2001, Uehara 1986) the process of adjustment is more difficult than the one following the "initial cultural shock" (the shock that the remigrants felt when they arrived in the foreign country). Despite this observation, the "reverse cultural shock" is less approached than the "initial culture shock" (Adler 1981, Mooradian 2004). Moreover, those who successfully adapted to another culture (those who overcame the initial shock of adapting to the country of migration) have the most difficulties when having to adapt home (Koester 1984, Mooradian 2004). Usually, migrants go through a process of preparation for the shock of a new culture (by acquiring information about the country in general and about the community in particular); such a stage usually does not exist when they return in the community of origin. In this context, the social support is essential in facilitating their adjustment (all the more so in the case of remigrant children), but the likelihood of this support being provided is affected by the image of this group, which is perceived as needing it much less than other vulnerable groups (especially if there are other groups of migrants in that particular community).

The reverse cultural shock (defined as a set of psychological and social traits related to the adjustment to the community of origin after a period of time spent abroad - Uehara 1986) is also known as the readjusting, the reacculturating, reassimilating or re-entry shock (Mooradian 2004). It is believed to follow certain patterns, which have been described by various theorists. One such model has been developed by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) - some of the first to study the reverse cultural shock as part of the adjustment process. The model included a graphical representation of the process, a curve under the shape of the letter "W" (in fact, an extension of a previous representation of the process of adjustment which only included the adjustment to the initial cultural shock, a process illustrated under the shape of the letter "U" - by Lysgaard 1955). The model includes 8 stages that the remigrant goes through. The first four refer to the initial migration: The "Honeymoon," the "Crisis," the "Recovery," the "Adjustment." The last four are basically the same but they refer to the return. The "Honeymoon" at home may take a few weeks, when the remigrant is happy to find familiar people and places; the second stage is the "Crisis" at home, when life begins to set, when doubts related to the decision to return appear, along with the first issues

related to the redefinition of identity (including physical and psychological manifestations: anxiety, alienation, sleep problems etc.). During this stage, which lasts two to three months (Adler 1981), most remigrants resist adjustment; the "Recovery" (at home) includes the physical and psychological adjustment – the remigrants begin to feel "at home," but cultural differences persist; the fourth stage is the "Adjustment" (at home), when the remigrants no longer feel the desire to go back to the country they returned from. They tend to focus on the future and achieve a balanced vision of life (Storti 2001).

Other theorists include another important moment, the preparation of the return, when remigrants prepare the logistics of the return and say their "good byes." This stage may take from a few weeks to a few months (Adler 1981).

The very fact that remigrants use the term "home" seems to generate problems. "Home" is a safe space, both physically and emotionally. Here things and relationships are predictable, feelings such as trust and belonging predominate (Mooradian 2004). In actuality, the community of origin does not always maintain such characteristics, or quite the opposite; the migrant has to notice the changes that have taken place and to get used to new norms, customs and demands. And these things take time. Time is an essential component in the process of readjustment, and researchers (Storti 2001) underline the longitudinal character of the process of readjustment to the reverse cultural shock.

In conclusion

The readjustment of remigrants is a difficult, stressful, and usually underestimated process (as shown before, it actually takes longer for remigrants to adapt to their community of origin than it takes to adjust to a foreign community). Readjustment is very much tied to the concept of "identity" (because the "social support" is influenced by the "social image"). The changes related to identity are an essential part of the migrant's experience. Whether we relate to the influence of the culture from the country of migration, or we refer to the influence of the community of origin before and after migration, the individual will eventually identify with both cultures, at the same time or successively (Gaw 2000, Mooradian 2004).

Emigration and remigration are stressful life situations that remigrants, including children, need to overcome. In order to adjust, individuals must have or must develop certain capacities. Some individuals are more capable than others to overcome the difficulties related to remigration. Only 70 to 80 percent of the Romanian remigrant children manage to adjust. Others need support to develop adjustment capacities. In order to reduce the risk of negative effects and support their reintegration, they must be helped by the communities of origin through efficient methods in stimulating the resilience process (Luca et al. 2012). The process needs to include the dismantling of the myth of "easy adjustment" as well as concrete integration policies and programs. The way in which the

environment (be it the family, or in the larger context, the community, represented by its members and its institutions) answers to the need for development of the individuals affects in a positive or negative manner the remigrants' capacity to adjust, producing short, medium and even long term effects.

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