

THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF RETURN MIGRATION INTENTIONS AMONG ROMANIAN MIGRANTS IN CANADA

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Abstract:

The dynamics of Romanian return migration have long been overshadowed by the scale of emigration; they are becoming visible as communities abroad mature. The migrants consistently consider returning, and this intention is classified into various types, such as permanent return (often upon retirement) or re-migration (subsequent departure, indicating failure to reintegrate). Although nearly half of the study participants in Canada view returning positively, few have concrete plans, demonstrating the importance of objective factors in the decision to return.

The decision is a “complex cocktail” of factors of attraction like the opportunity to invest remittances in property and the desire to enjoy a lower cost of living in retirement. In contrast, reintegration is strongly hindered by deep dissatisfaction with institutional quality in Romania, perceived as being marked by corruption and a lack of meritocracy. Subjectively, a constant factor is the emotional cost of uprooting, such as homesickness, which acts as a powerful force of attraction. However, upon returning, migrants often encounter social mistrust and mental differences, making social reintegration challenging and increasing the likelihood of re-emigration.

Keywords: return migration; remittances; migrant capital; institutional quality; social reintegration; re-migration

Introduction

Return migration is defined as the process by which international migrants return to their country of origin or place of birth after spending time abroad. This movement may be permanent, temporary, or circular, and it involves multiple dimensions, including economic, social, cultural, and political aspects². Return migration is not an isolated event, but rather a diverse process that produces uneven and unequal social effects.

The concept of return migration

The main definitions of this concept can be summarized by starting with George Gmelch, who was among the first sociologists to analyze return migration as a phenomenon of the modern era. In previous centuries, migration involved one-way journeys from which migrants did not return³. He considered return migration to be poorly understood and difficult to quantify⁴. In cases where individuals do not succeed in readjusting or achieving socio-

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² Anastasia Christou, *Narratives of Place, Culture and Identity: Second-Generation Greek-Americans Return Home*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006, p. 226

³ George Gmelch, *Return Migration*, “Annual Review of Anthropology”, New York, 1980, p. 135

⁴ *Idem*

cultural integration within the host environment, re-emigration constitutes a temporary solution to the challenges of adaptation and belonging¹.

Russel King defines this phenomenon as the return of a person to their place of birth as a natural stage in the migration cycle and not just the “end” of the migration experience². In contrast, Jean-Pierre Cassarino considers return migration as a strategic phenomenon, planned in advance by migrants and influenced by the social, economic and human capital they accumulate abroad³. In his conceptual revisitation of return migration, Cassarino frames the phenomenon not merely as the end of a migratory cycle but as a strategic and planned component within the broader process of mobility. The return migration should be understood as part of a “calculated strategy” developed at the household level, where migrants consciously plan their migration projects with clear economic and social objectives in mind⁴. Considering these three definitions of the concept, which are not mutually exclusive, return migration can be generated by a migrant's need, a natural progression, or a strategic approach predicted from the beginning.

Theories of return migration

In order to explain the dynamics of the return migration, we can see several key theories based on objective or subjective factors. If we apply the neoclassical economic theory, the return migration is seen as a failure to integrate economically in the host country or a rational decision to maximize income in the origin country (e.g., due to wage differences)^{5 6}. At the same time, the new economics of labor migration theory emphasizes that migrants often plan to return from the beginning. They intend to accumulate savings or acquire skills abroad to improve the welfare of their households at home⁷.

The structural theories emphasize institutional and systemic barriers in host societies (e.g., discrimination, legal insecurity, or social exclusion) that push migrants to return, regardless of personal desire^{8 9}. The transnationalism theory explains return migration by stating that migrants maintain strong ties to their home and host countries. This leads to fluid identities and sometimes cyclical or repeated return migrations. Links to the home country help migrants receive support and later send back remittances. Return migration is not always final, but rather part of a broader transnational life strategy^{10 11}. The theory of sociocultural integration emphasizes a negative correlation between the degree of migrants' integration into the host society and their intentions to return to their country of origin. In other words, the

¹ George Gmelch, *Op. cit.*, p. 146

² Russel King, *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?*, United Nations and the International Organization for Migration, Geneva, 2000, p. 7

³ Jean Pierre Cassarino, *Teorizando sobre a migração de retorno: uma abordagem conceitual revisitada sobre migrantes de retorno*, “Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana”, Vol. 21, No. 41, 2013, p. 24

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 25-26

⁵ *Idem*

⁶ George J. Borjas, Bernt Bratsberg *Who Leaves? The Outmigration of the Foreign-Born*, “The Review of Economics and Statistics”, Vol. 78, No. 1, 1996, pp. 165–166

⁷ Hein de Haas, Tineke Fokkema, *The Effects of Integration and Transnational Ties on International Return Migration Intentions*, “Demographic Research”, Vol. 25, 2011, pp. 776-777
<https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2011.25.24> (02.11.2025)

⁸ Russel King, *Op. cit.*, p. 7

⁹ Francesco P. Cerase, *Expectations and Reality: A Case Study of Return Migration from the United States to Southern Italy*, “International migration review”, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1974, p. 261

¹⁰ Peggy Levitt, Nina Glick Schiller, *Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society*, “International Migration Review”, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2004, p. 1024

¹¹ Jørgen Carling, Marta Bivand Erdal, *Return Migration and Transnationalism: How Are the Two Connected?* “International Migration”, Vol. 52, No. 6, 2014, p. 9 <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12180> (22.11.2025)

more deeply migrants become embedded in the sociocultural fabric of the destination country, the less likely they are to consider returning home. This inverse relationship has been supported by various studies^{1 2}.

The last theory we have retained for this article is the psychological and identity-based theory, focusing on belonging, nostalgia, and cultural or religious identity as core motivators for return, even when economic conditions are favorable abroad³.

Types of return migration

Types of return migration that have been analyzed include permanent return migration with the aim of reintegration into the country of origin⁴, temporary return for a limited time followed by departure^{5 6}, forced return due to extreme situations such as war, economic crises, and social crises⁷, planned return⁸; repetitive migration involving departure and return to the same countries of origin and destination while maintaining transnational connections⁹; and return migration associated with identity, cultural, and religious connections¹⁰.

The Return Migration of the Romanian Citizens

Regarding the migration of Romanians abroad, estimates of the size of the phenomenon are still poorly documented, as it is difficult to separate return from circular migration. Early studies (2000–2002) highlighted a circular migration, with large cycles of departure-return, but later the trend was towards settling in the host countries. The economic crisis of 2008 increased intentions to return, but intentions did not always translate into actual returns¹¹. Most migrants plan to return to Romania at some point. The prospect of returning is a constant presence in the life of a migrant. As with the decision to emigrate, the decision to return is influenced by a complex mix of factors¹². Romanian emigration after 1989 is a relatively recent phenomenon, as are similar trends in other Eastern European countries. These trends accelerated after these countries joined the European Union but then declined. Many Romanian emigrants are young and active in the labor market. Conditions in their country of origin are not always conducive to returning, considering economic development, employment prospects, and practical or nominal support for returning^{13 14}.

¹ Amelie Constant, Douglas S. Massey, *Return Migration by German Guestworkers: Neoclassical Versus New Economic Theories*, "International migration", Vol. 40, No. 4, 2002, p. 14

² Hein de Haas, Tineke Fokkema, *Op. cit.*, p. 767

³ Anastasia Christou, *Op. cit.*, p. 226

⁴ Russel King, *Op. cit.*, p. 7

⁵ Anastasia Christou, *Op. cit.*, p. 226

⁶ Amelie Constant, Klaus Zimmermann, *Circular and Repeat Migration: Counts of Exits and Years Away from the Host Country*, "Population Research and Policy Review", Vol. 30, No. 4, 2011, p. 498

⁷ Richard Black, Khalid Koser, *The End of The Refugee Cycle?: Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*, Berghahn Books, New York, 1999, p. 12

⁸ Jean Pierre Cassarino, *Op. cit.*, p. 24

⁹ Amelie Constant, Klaus Zimmermann, *Op. cit.*, p. 498

¹⁰ Anastasia Christou, *Op. cit.*, p. 226

¹¹ Remus Gabriel Anghel, Alina Botezat, Anatolie Coșciug, Ioana Manafi, Monica Roman, *Return Migration, and Their Effects. A Comprehensive Review on the Romanian Case*, "Central European Labour Studies Institute", Discussion Paper No. 43, Bratislava, 2017, p. 7

¹² Dumitru Sandu, *Lumile sociale ale migrației românești în străinătate*, Editura Polirom, București, 2010, p. 110

¹³ Dumitru Sandu, *De ce revin românii în țară și parte din ei re-migrează?*, Contributors.ro, 2024, <https://www.contributors.ro/de-ce-revin-romanii-in-tara-si-parte-din-ei-re-migreaza/> (11.10.2025)

¹⁴ Ruxandra Trandafioiu, *The Politics of Migration and Diaspora in Eastern Europe: Media, Public Discourse and Policy (1st ed.)*, Routledge, London, 2022, p. 75 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003055242> (11.10.2025)

Return migration among Romanian communities has become a subject of study and analysis, especially since Romanian institutions have made it an objective in recent years¹, if you compare with the years 1990 – 2000². Martinescu and Moisescu's analysis of the Romanian diaspora in Switzerland reveals that the Romanian state lacks a strategy for communities residing outside its borders. The state's sole objective is to bring these communities back, which is an unrealistic goal that disregards the current nature of migration³. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of trust that Romanians living abroad have in Romanian institutions.

The return intentions among Romanian migrants in some countries like United Kingdom tend to diminish over time, with many shifting focuses toward formalizing their residence abroad, trend which is largely driven by persistent structural issues in Romania, such as economic and political instability, low wages, limited job opportunities, dissatisfaction with the healthcare and education systems. While a minority initially intended to return, the majority either abandoned these plans or returned briefly only to migrate again due to inadequate income opportunities⁴. Measuring return migration is inherently difficult, as much of it occurs spontaneously and is not officially documented, despite the availability of data on forced and voluntarily assisted returns. Ciobanu (2015) also points out that return migration is complex to quantify due to the varied and often repeated migration experiences of individuals⁵.

Reports by international organizations specializing in migration indicate that the intention to return is very low among Eastern European emigrants. A 2019 OECD report states that fewer than 10% of Romanians in Spain and 30% in Italy, the two European countries with the highest Romanian immigration, have expressed an intention to return (OECD, 2019). These migrants expressed high levels of uncertainty about Romania's immediate future and cited family considerations, such as having children who are fully integrated into the host society. Some revealed plans to migrate to other European countries if economic conditions become unfavorable in their first country of settlement⁶.

Migration networks contribute to migrants leaving the host country. These networks are a form of social capital that plays a role in return migration by connecting migrants, former migrants, and potential migrants through a set of interpersonal relationships between countries of origin and destination. These networks transmit and continuously update detailed information about conditions in both countries. If reintegration fails due to structural problems in the country of origin, the same networks that facilitated initial migration may support re-migration intentions, transforming social capital into a factor of continuous mobility.

¹ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, Catalina Maria Moisescu, *Understanding the Romanian Diaspora in Switzerland: The Missing Link*, "The Swiss Forum on Foreign Policy - foraus - Forum Aussenpolitik", Bern, 2023, p. 53, <https://www.foraus.ch/publications/understanding-the-romanian-diaspora-the-missing-link/> (11.10.2025)

² Dumitru Sandu, *Emerging Transnational Migration from Romanian Villages*, "Current Sociology", Vol. 53, No. 4, 2005, p. 573, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392105052715> (11.10.2025)

³ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, Cătălina Maria Moisescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 61

⁴ Aniela Matei, Cătălin Ghinăraș, Mihaela Ghența, Louise Mladen-Macovei, *Return Intentions of Romanian Migrants From the United Kingdom: An Exploratory Approach*, "Sociologie Românească", Vol. 22, No. 1, 2024, p. 151, <https://doi.org/10.33788/sr.22.1.8>. (11.10.2025)

⁵ Ruxandra Oana Ciobanu, *Multiple Migration Flows of Romanians*, "Mobilities", Vol. 10, No. 3, 2015, p. 472, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2013.863498>

⁶ OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *International Migration Outlook 2019*, "International Migration Outlook", OECD Publishing, 2019, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/international-migration-outlook-2019_c3e35eec-en.html (11.10.2025)

Since 1990, Romania has experienced a significant demographic impact from emigration, with 18.2% of its population emigrating, placing it seventh in the EU in this regard. After 1990 the ideology has changed within the active population towards the migration ideology, especially the international migration for work or as a life project¹. According to Eurostat data, 2022 marked an exceptional statistical event as it was the first year in which the net migration balance of Romanian citizen wages was positive. That year, approximately 190,000 Romanian citizens returned to the country, exceeding the estimated 175,000 emigrants, resulting in an increase of about 15,000 people². However, D. Sandu interprets this positive balance with reservations in the context of a lack of relevant statistical data³.

Additionally, part of this influx is attributed to migrants with extensive experience abroad who are approaching or have reached retirement age. Returning for retirement indicates completion of the migration cycle (accumulation of savings) rather than a direct response to domestic labor market opportunities. The return intentions are shaped by economic, social, and integration-related factors, according with the World Bank. A larger gap between current earnings in the host country and predicted earnings in Romania reduces the likelihood of return. Thus, better wages abroad act as a strong pull factor keeping migrants from returning. On the other hand, having close family members in Romania-especially children or parents-and sending remittances significantly increases the probability of return⁴.

Methodology

The research is empirical, exploratory in nature, based on the collection of primary data and through it we aimed to collect mainly qualitative data from a population that is difficult to identify exactly⁵. The sociological survey was the central method of data collection, being implemented in two stages, using the questionnaire and the interview as instruments

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to capture migration experiences, integration in Canada and maintaining ties with Romania. It was administered online via the Google Forms platform, for rapid distribution, accessibility for the target population and automatic data extraction. Its construction followed the neutral formulation of the questions to avoid influencing the answers, being structured into thematic sections as follows:

- Introductory data - status in Canada, membership in migratory generations, period and region of emigration, educational level;
- The emigration experience - reasons for leaving, Canada's attraction factors, social and professional integration;
- Relations with Romania - maintaining family, friendly, professional and administrative contacts; perception of Romania; symbolic and cultural ties;

¹ Dumitru Sandu, *Lumile sociale ale migrației românești în străinătate*, Editura Polirom, București, 2010, p. 74

² Dumitru Sandu, *De ce revin românii în țară și parte din ei re-migrează?*, Contributors.ro, 2024, <https://www.contributors.ro/de-ce-revin-romanii-in-tara-si-parte-din-ei-re-migreaza/> (11.10.2025)

³ *Idem*

⁴ Tim Hinks, Simon Davies, *Intentions to Return: Evidence from Romanian Migrants*, "World Bank Policy Research Working Paper", No. 7166, 2016, pp. 17-18, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2552992>

⁵ Vasile Miftode, *Metodologia sociologică. Metode și tehnici de cercetare sociologică*, Editura Porto-Franco, Galați, 1995, p. 60

- Identity and belonging - self-identity definition (Romanian vs. Canadian), the importance of citizenship, the role of language and traditions, future intentions, plans to return to Romania or migrate to other states;
- Final mentions - possibility of participating in in-depth interviews and recommendations from other respondents.

The main methodological objective in developing the questionnaire was to obtain objective answers. The questions were designed to influence respondents as little as possible and avoid tempting them to alter their answers. Through participatory observation, we found that certain topics affect people emotionally, and their reaction to a question's content or formulation can alter the entire questionnaire or lead them to refuse to complete it.

Interview

As mentioned, the research was designed to obtain qualitative data, which is why a set of interviews was organized to complement the opinion poll. The interviews aimed to identify patterns of meaning, motivation, and social representation related to emigration to Canada.

The semi-structured interviews aimed to deepen the qualitative dimensions, such as motivations, migration objectives, and the relationship with Romania. Open questions allowed the participants to freely express themselves, while a guide with ten themes offered the possibility of subsequent analysis.

We conducted 22 interviews with participants selected based on the questionnaire and their voluntary expression of interest. Due to the limited availability of individuals willing to participate in an interview, the only selection criterion was being a Romanian citizen or a person originally from Romania who has been living in Canada for at least one year. The interviews were conducted via videoconference using Google Meet or Zoom, depending on each person's preference, and the day and time were mutually agreed upon. The average interview lasted one hour. The discussions were based on a guide with ten issues to be addressed. The researcher took notes on the conclusions in real time. The interviews were not recorded, and this was made clear to the participants from the beginning to encourage more honest answers. In the first stage of the data analysis, the text was reviewed and ordered according to the ten themes in the interview guide. Then, the relevant text segments were labeled by thematic category. The interviews were conducted with selected individuals from the questionnaire respondents who expressed their availability and provided contact details. The interviews complemented the data set collected through the questionnaire by addressing sensitive and deeper themes with a segment of the population open to discussing them. This population was given the opportunity to express themselves more freely than in the context of a question¹.

The target population consists of adult Romanian citizens or individuals of Romanian descent who have lived in Canada for at least one year. Based on the main waves of emigration to Canada and their age, we currently encounter first-, second-, third-, and fourth-generation Romanians. First-generation Romanians are those who emigrated themselves. Second-generation Romanians are the children of parents who came to Canada. Third-generation Romanians are the grandchildren of those who emigrated. Fourth-generation Romanians are the great-grandchildren of those who emigrated. We used a non-probabilistic sampling method with the "snowball" and "pyramid" techniques, considering the available

¹ Paula Fomby, Narayan Sastry, *Data Collection on Sensitive Topics with Adolescents Using Interactive Voice Response Technology*, "Methoden, daten, analysen" Vol. 13, No. 1, 2019, p. 108

resources and accessibility of target population members^{1 2}. First, an initial list of 100 subjects was created. The subjects were diverse in terms of profession, seniority in Canada, generation, and age. The first set of messages and links to the questionnaire were sent to these subjects. The initial list of contacts was made up of people known personally to the researcher, as well as representatives and members of Romanian associations and people met at various events of the Romanian community in Ontario during the preceding period. Subsequently, based on email addresses recommended by some of the respondents, we distributed the questionnaire in two subsequent stages. After three stages, we received 160 completed questionnaires.

At the end of the questionnaire, each respondent had the option to agree to participate in an interview. In this way, the 22 people who were interviewed were selected. It should be noted that, of the 32 people who expressed willingness to participate in an interview, only 22 could be organized.

Return Migration to and from Canada

In the context of the return migration of Romanians from Canada, it is useful to examine whether there is a phenomenon of definitive departures among Canadians and permanent residents that could influence the Romanian community, given that the study is conducted in a state demographically shaped by immigration. Return migration from Canada to the countries of origin of its immigrants is becoming increasingly relevant in the current context of economic pressures and the housing affordability crisis. This process is not marginal; it reflects the limits of the Canadian integration model, which attracts skilled labor but does not always retain it in the long term. According to data published by Statistics Canada, we can see that, between 2014 and 2024, approximately one-quarter of all immigrants to Canada will leave at some point, and the figures show an upward trend. For example, in 2014, out of 260,308 immigrants, 65,222 (25.05%) left Canada. By the end of 2024, out of 483,654 immigrants, 118,409 (24.48%) left Canada³.

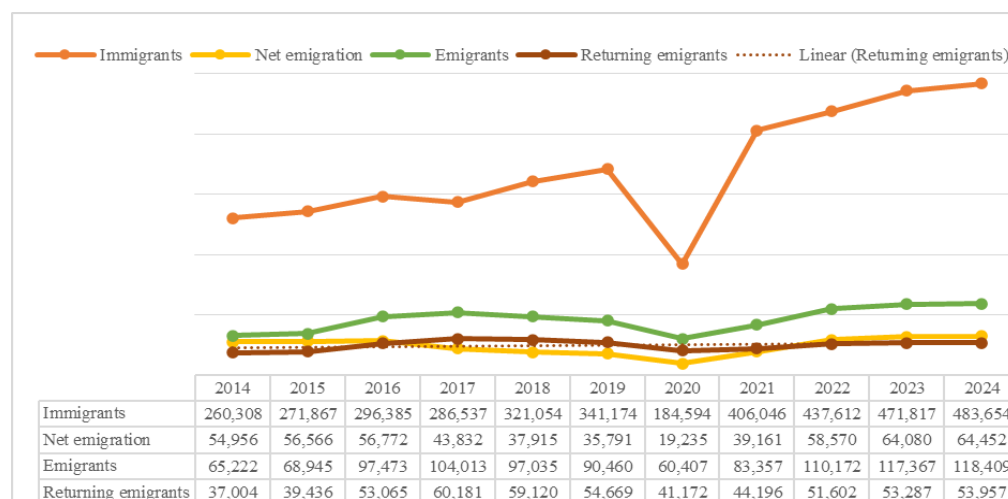


Figure 1. Estimates of the Components of International Migration in Canada⁴

¹ Ion Cauc, Beatrice Manu, Daniela Pârlea, Laura Goran, *Metodologia cercetării sociologice. Metode și tehnici de cercetare*, Editura Fundației României de Măine, Ediția a II-a, București, 2004, p. 50

² Vasile Miftode, *Op. cit.* p. 89

³ Statistics Canada, *Table 17-10-0040-01 Estimates of the Components of International Migration, quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.25318/1710004001-eng> (11.10.2025)

⁴ *Idem*

This statistical data confirms a problem with the Canadian immigration system: it is good at attracting migrants, especially skilled labor, but not at retaining them in the long term. However, Canadian authorities also quantify return migration separately in the same table. This movement of people who have previously emigrated to other countries can be observed as they return to Canada. Although this trend is also upward, a reduction in the intention to return is observed because the ratio of emigrants to returnees is changing. In 2014, 56.73% of emigrants returned to Canada, but this percentage is expected to decrease to 45.56% by 2024¹.

A 2024 opinion poll conducted by Ipsos in collaboration with the Canadian Citizenship Institute reveals that over a quarter of immigrants intend to leave Canada within the next two years. This indicates an emerging trend of remigration, either by returning to their countries of origin or by relocating to other developed countries². Theoretically, this phenomenon can be understood within the framework of the circular mobility paradigm³. According to this paradigm, migration is no longer a linear process, but rather a reversible dynamic determined by the cost-benefit ratio of integration.

For many Canadian immigrants, returning temporarily or permanently to their country of origin is not a failure of adaptation but rather a rational strategy to maximize economic and social capital as the cost of living in major Canadian cities (e.g., Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal) becomes prohibitive. In this sense, return migration emerges as a form of rebalancing mobility, reflecting the tension between the promise of the Canadian prosperity model and the labor market's structural realities. These trends call into question the sustainability of Canada's immigration model based on numerical growth. Without effective skills retention and development policies, Canada risks experiencing reverse brain drain, wherein human capital acquired within the Canadian system is reinvested in the economies of origin. This phenomenon is already observable among immigrants from South Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

Return migration is an essential phenomenon in contemporary international mobility dynamics. In Canada, it manifests relatively consistently. Romanian citizens are likely familiar with it. Recent migration studies show that return migration involves economic, cultural, and psychological factors that influence the decision to return and its impact on communities of origin and destination⁴. Constant returns can create identity and cultural pressures that reactivate ties with the country of origin and generate processes of reevaluating one's migratory trajectory⁵. Additionally, this dynamic contributes to the "fluidization" of spatial and identity belonging. In this context, the place of residence is not perceived as definitive but as part of a broader transnational journey⁶.

Studies on the Romanian diaspora support this perspective, emphasizing that many Romanian migrants in Canada maintain active ties with Romania through remittances,

¹ Statistics Canada, *Table 17-10-0040-01 Estimates of the Components of International Migration, quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.25318/1710004001-eng> (11.10.2025)

² Government of Canada, *Views of Immigration Levels – Public Opinion Research*, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/transition-binders/deputy-minister-2024/public-opinion-research.html> (11.10.2025)

³ Jørgen Carling, Silje Vatne Pettersen, *Return Migration Intentions in the Integration–Transnationalism Matrix*, "International Migration", Vol. 52, No. 6, 2014, p. 28

⁴ Jean Pierre Cassarino, *Op. cit.*, p. 41

⁵ Remus Gabriel Anghel, Alina Botezat, Anatolie Coșciug, Ioana Manafi, Monica Roman, *Op. cit.*, p. 14

⁶ Peggy Levitt, Nina Glick Schiller, *Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society*, "International Migration Review", Vol. 38, No. 3, 2004, p. 1024

investments, and participation in cultural and political projects¹ (D. Sandu, 2010). Thus, return migration becomes a factor of cohesion or indirect influence on those who remain in the destination country. The migration of Romanians to Canada must be contextualized within a specific temporal framework, which is often linked to one's professional career. Is Canada perceived as a permanent destination for Romanians who immigrated here, or as a place for economic and professional growth with the intention of returning upon retirement? This model is found in the paradigm of circular or temporary migration and is supported by international bodies such as the OECD and the IOM. However, it remains to be studied as far as Romanians are concerned.

Return migration is not just a personal choice; it is also part of a well-defined migration project. In this project, the accumulation of financial, human, and social capital abroad is strategically used for reintegration in the home country². This type of migration requires rigorous planning, investment in property or businesses in the home country, and careful management of the transition between two sociocultural spaces. The decision to return is often influenced by factors such as the desire to be close to family, high living costs after retirement, and a sense of belonging to the culture of origin. From this perspective, Canada is seen as a space of opportunity but not necessarily as a permanent “home,” as evident from the migration data published by Canadian authorities.

Data on the Return Migration of Romanians from Canada

Although return migration is often underestimated in public discourse, it is present within the Romanian community in Canada. Although official statistics on the scale of return migration are lacking, this study aimed to capture community members' perceptions and intentions regarding returning to Romania.

Assuming that most Romanians who settled in Canada intended to stay long-term, often without a concrete plan to return, we included a question about this possibility in our survey. The question offered respondents five distinct answer choices designed to capture their intentions and attitudes toward relocating, specifically in relation to Romania.

The first option - *“Yes, this idea has always existed for me, but I've never really thought about it”* - reflects a latent or subconscious inclination toward returning, without any active planning or reflection.

The second choice - *“I intend or wish to return/move at some point, but I don't have such a plan yet”* - signals a more conscious desire to return, albeit without concrete steps being taken.

The third option - *“I am going to return/move back to Romania in the near future”* - denotes a clear and immediate intention backed by a specific timeline or plan.

In contrast, the fourth response - *“No, returning/moving to Romania is not an option for me”* - expresses a definitive rejection of the idea of return.

Lastly, the fifth option - *“I intend to move from Canada to another country, but not to Romania”* - introduces the possibility of migration but explicitly rules out Romania as a destination, indicating a transnational mobility preference unrelated to repatriation. Together, these response categories provide a nuanced picture of migration intentions, ranging from passive thoughts to firm decisions.

¹ Dumitru Sandu, *Lumile sociale ale migrației românești în străinătate*, Editura Polirom, București, 2010, p. 134

² Francesco P. Cerase, *Op. cit.*, p. 261

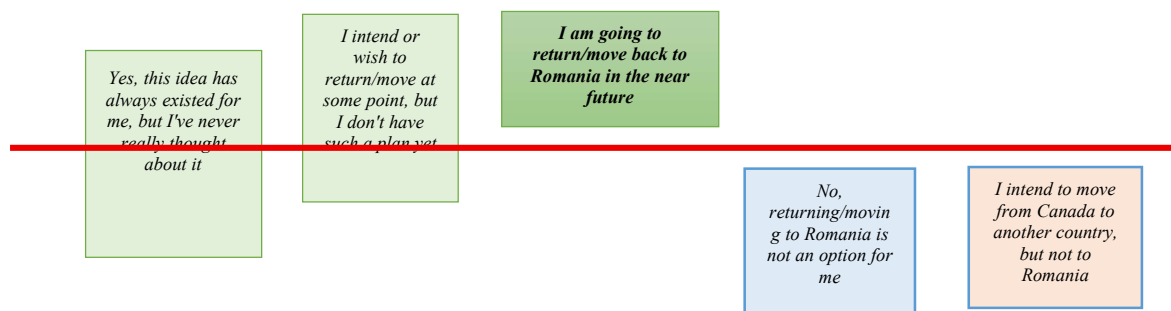


Figure 2. Intentions and Attitudes Toward Relocation¹

This question targeted the idea of returning to Romania as part of Romanian migrants' identity, as well as an expression of potential life changes in the medium or long term. It is worth noting that nearly half of the respondents (46.5%) stated that they categorically do not consider returning to Romania. In contrast, 41.88% of participants admit to considering the idea, either as an intention or an abstract desire, but without concrete plans. Only 2.3% indicated a firm intention to return to Romania in the immediate future. This distribution shows that return is not completely ruled out for a significant part of the Romanian diaspora and retains a “mental presence” as a future possibility, albeit one that is poorly outlined.

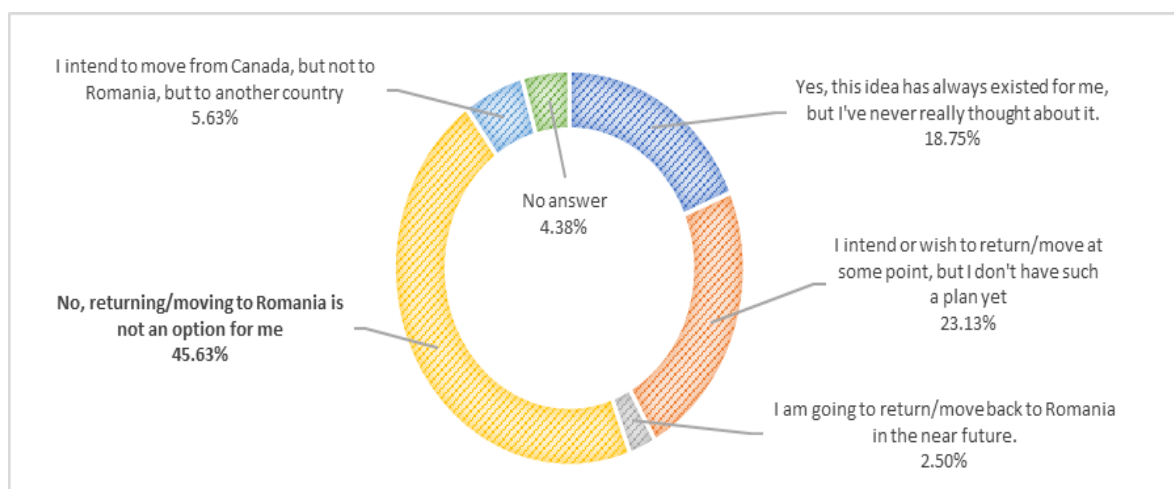


Figure 3. Intention to Return to Romania²

We used the independence test (χ^2) to see if the intention to return is related to the emigrant generation to which the respondent belongs. The variables regarding emigrant generation were grouped into the following categories: 1946–1989, 1990–1999, 2000–2007, and after 2008. The variables regarding the intention to return to Romania were grouped into the following categories: not returning, intending but without a concrete plan, considering it, and other options. The results of the chi-square test applied to the emigrant generation and intention to return data were as follows: $\chi^2 = 18.14844$, $df = 12$, $p = 0.111257017$. These results suggest that the generation of emigration does not significantly influence the intention

¹ Author's research

² Author's research. Data was collected between March and September 2024

to return to Romania. This leads us to conclude that motivations for returning are determined by other individual factors, such as level of integration, socioeconomic status, current age, family situation, and sense of transnational belonging, rather than the historical period of emigration. Additionally, the absence of a significant association between the variables may indicate stability in attitudes within the Romanian diaspora, suggesting that perceptions related to returning remain consistent regardless of the time of departure.

We tested for an association with the cultural identity and integration variable (self-definition as Romanian or Canadian) and found that Romanians in Ontario, Canada, regardless of their self-identification. While the statistical test did not show a significant association between cultural identity and return intentions, the distribution of responses suggests a pattern worth exploring further. Respondents who identify more strongly as Romanian tend to express greater openness to the idea of returning, including higher levels of abstract interest (“Yes, this idea has always existed for me...”), intentions to return without specific plans, and even firm intentions to return in the near future.

By contrast, those who self-identify as more Canadian show a concentration of responses in the category rejecting return migration, as well as a higher proportion indicating plans to relocate to countries other than Romania. This gradient from Romanian to Canadian identity aligns with a decrease in emotional or practical ties to Romania, as reflected in return migration intentions. Although the statistical test ($\chi^2 = 18.15$, $p = 0.111$) suggests this association is not strong enough to be statistically significant, the emerging pattern in the chart points to a soft correlation that may warrant further qualitative or longitudinal investigation.

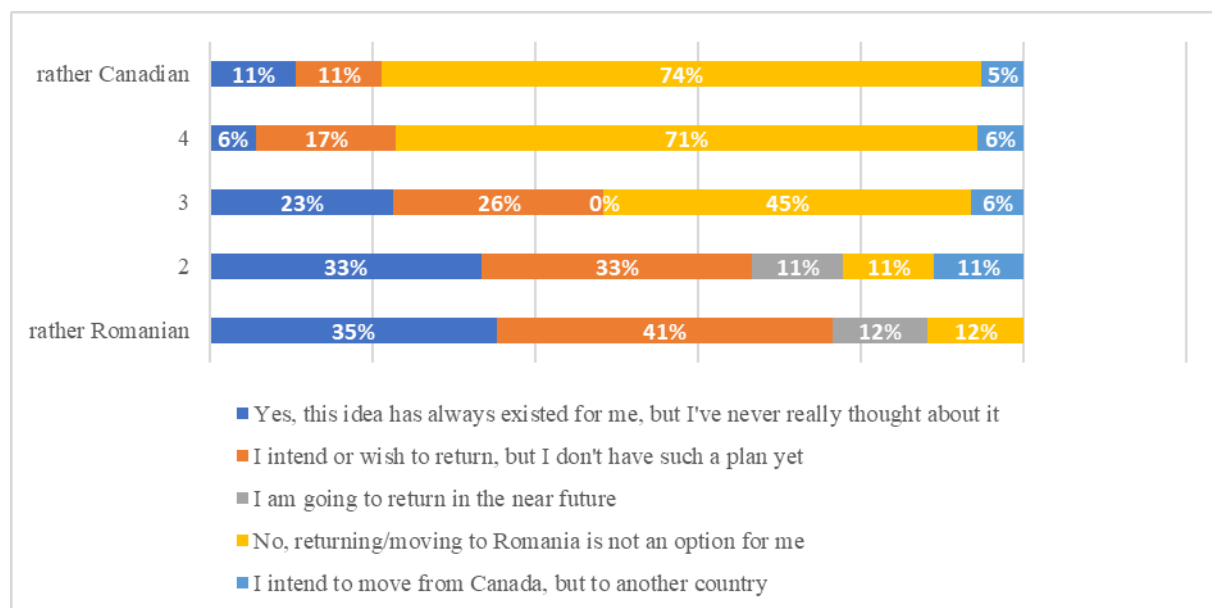


Figure 4. Return Intentions by Cultural Identity¹

To complement the quantitative data, we conducted in-depth interviews to explore the extent to which the idea of returning exists in personal and collective discourse. Respondents reported that they have recently begun hearing more frequently about Romanians returning to the country, especially upon retirement. While these observations cannot replace statistical

¹ Author's research. Data was collected between March and September 2024

data, they reveal an emerging perception in the community: returning is no longer seen as unusual, but rather as a growing option within Romanian social networks in the diaspora.

Respondents identified a possible turning point as the onset of the pandemic. Travel restrictions, job market instability, and social isolation have led some to reevaluate the decision to live permanently outside of Romania. It is important to note that none of those who presented such examples were able to provide data on a significant flow of people. They stated that, until a few years ago, they had rarely heard of such cases.

Objective Factors Influencing Return Migration

“Is it worth returning to Romania?” This is one of the key ideas that emerged from interviews summarizing one of the most relevant dilemmas faced by Romanians in Ontario. This question reflects a personal inquiry and an implicit analysis of the ratio of the costs and benefits of returning. This analysis is formed through a realistic prism in the context of migratory experience as the next stage after having the opportunity to leave for Canada. Return migration is rarely a simple geographical return. The attractiveness of Romania is composed of a sum of objective and subjective factors, each of which has particular relevance, as I observed among the Romanian community members I met. For example, for people approaching retirement age, the standard of living and the healthcare system are of high importance, while for young people, the opportunity to study or start a business is more important.

A central aspect highlighted in the interviews is the idea of return as a future opportunity, similar to the opportunity to leave for Canada. This logic suggests that returning is not perceived as regression but as a potential strategic reconfiguration of life, a new beginning in a place offering concrete and symbolic benefits, whether economic or identity-related. Based on the data collected from the interviews, we can delineate several categories of objective factors that influence the decision to return.

Economic and Livelihood Factors

The lower cost of living in Romania is becoming a comparative advantage, especially for Canadians approaching retirement who have accumulated resources. The possibility of investing in real estate or retiring in a more favorable financial context is often discussed. Return migration is often a staged decision made at the end of one's working life as a strategy to retreat to a familiar and seemingly more accessible environment. The decision to return is no longer based on career opportunities, but on quality of life in the context of old age.

Examples:

“Today's Romania is attractive in terms of living standards for many Romanians who are not connected to Canada” (U., who emigrated in 1985).

“I see people returning, investing in property, and retiring...” (D., who emigrated in 2001).

From the discussions held during the interviews, it was found that the sale of a house in Canada brings in enough money to purchase three similar properties in Romania. The difference between the two real estate markets is significant. Some Romanians in Canada have invested their earnings in a home purchased over time. They see such a move as an opportunity to maintain their housing comfort and have money for maintenance or alternative investments in Romania.

Institutional and Administrative Factors

Objective factors such as the quality of public administration, meritocracy, professional ethics, and civic sense influence migration. In our case, however, these factors are mentioned as major obstacles. A lack of predictability and persistent bureaucracy or

administrative corruption perpetuates the perception of risk associated with reintegration into the Romanian system.

Examples:

“I could live in Romania if there were more professional ethics and civic sense.” (I., who emigrated in 2001), and “Services have improved, but there are still situations that remind you of the previous period” (L., who emigrated in 1999).

The results of the opinion questionnaire show that the political and administrative situation in Romania was the main factor that determined emigration, with almost half of the respondents (49.69%) mentioning it as a determining factor. By comparison, only 26.71% of respondents considered the economic situation a determining factor of emigration, and 26.09% considered the social situation a determining factor. For Romanians in Ontario, Canada, institutional and administrative factors inhibit return migration, changing perceptions that reforming Romanian institutions takes time and requires solid examples. Discussions during the interviews reflect that Romanians in Canada are aware of progress and reforms in Romania. However, their expectations and demands are high.

Educational and Professional Factors

Education is a priority for younger generations, but not as much for those who immigrated mid-life and spent 10 or 20 years in Canada. For young people, the decision to return is closely linked to professional development opportunities and adequate conditions for practicing in specialized fields. Educational migration is not motivated by a rejection of the Romanian system, but rather by a lack of resources for advanced training. This leaves room for a possible return, conditional on institutional changes.

Examples:

“I went to study abroad not because I disliked studying in Romania, but because there were no resources or conditions to improve. I wanted to study something unavailable in Romania and return there.” (A., arrived in Canada in 2023)

“I believe Romania has valuable people. I would return at the first opportunity that benefits me and Romania as a whole” (D., who emigrated in 2001).

Although the interviews reflect individual situations, identifying common elements allows us to pinpoint systemic causes (objective factors) that influence the decision to return. In the examples presented above and in other accounts, we find several categories of objective factors. Starting with economic and professional factors, continuing with the institutional environment in Romania, and ending with factors related to the active life cycle. The statement, “I see people coming back, investing in property, and retiring there,” confirms the hypothesis of cumulative return factors. In this case, return is not an early return to the labor market but rather a completion of the migratory cycle. People take advantage of the savings they accumulated to settle in their own property and benefit from a lower cost of living at retirement age.

The statement that “today's Romania is attractive in terms of living standards for many Romanians not tied to Canada” suggests that Romania is becoming a viable or even preferable retirement option in light of its own financial stability and Western living standards. Essentially, while a high material standard of living attracts those with resources, the quality of institutional life and civic space remains the greatest obstacle to definitive and productive reintegration. This transforms the intention to return into a time-conditioned movement or one vulnerable to re-emigration.

Subjective Factors Regarding Return Migration

Returning to Romania is not a simple, rational decision based on economic or institutional indicators. Rather, it is shaped by a set of intangible factors—psychological, affective, and symbolic, which manifest in contradictory discourses, experiences, and decision-making mechanisms. The most frequently encountered subjective factor in the interviews is nostalgia, the longing for Romania, family, an idealized past, and the emotional familiarity of childhood places. In the analyzed discourses, longing functions as a compensatory value in the face of the diaspora's material advantages: “We are happy every day, but if you add everything up, you get a minus, and that minus is the longing for Romania, the uprooting.” (O., who emigrated in 2017).

This “difference in emotional balance” reflects the psychological cost of migration. This cost is felt more intensely as the duration of the stay abroad increases and as the life cycle approaches retirement. The most relevant ideas collected during interviews from this point of view are: “The future is Romanian—that's where we want to be in a few years!” (D., who emigrated to Canada in 1995), and “Nostalgia sometimes grips me” (D., who emigrated to Canada in 1995). One of the long-term effects of migration is the reshaping of personal and cultural identity, which often creates a sense of belonging to two worlds: the one of origin and the adoptive one. “I feel more at home in Europe than in Canada” (D., who emigrated in 2001), and “When I retire, I am drawn to the land” (C., who emigrated in 2003).

These statements express symbolic relationships with “home,” transcending geography and being built on cultural, value, and emotional compatibility. Return is not just physical, but also an attempt to reintegrate identity and resolve inner discomfort. For some migrants, the return is blocked not by Romanian realities but by psychological mechanisms that are unconsciously activated to justify the decision to emigrate. These mechanisms manifest as a generalized rejection of Romania or selective comparisons with the success of others.

“Romania has nothing good. It's my way of reassuring myself that I made the right choice” (V., who emigrated in 2008). (V., who emigrated in 2008)

“Many didn't make it in Canada and are envious of those who stayed.” (U., who emigrated in 1985).

“Romania was and still is the punching bag of the Canadian community. Romanians compare Romania 25 years ago with Canada today” (R., who emigrated to Canada in 2008).

These types of responses reveal the process of justifying the decision to migrate and avoiding regret, even in the face of partial or perceived failure to integrate. This psychological mechanism serves to justify the initial migration decision and diminish feelings of regret or failure. Similarly, there is pressure from communities in the country of origin to demonstrate material success, even through superficial symbols. This can intensify the feeling of “not being at home anymore.”

During the discussions, we find emotions such as envy towards acquaintances who have prospered in the country, which illustrates a problem of social comparison. The success of those who remained in Romania (often based on advantages from the European internal market or quality social networks) calls into question the benefits of migration, creating tension within migration networks. For long-term migrants, “home” becomes a complex concept situated between emotional and cultural spaces. Thus, return is not only seen as a return “to origin,” but also as re-entry into a space that is perceived as more valuable than North America:

“In Europe, I feel more at home than in Canada. I feel closer to the culture and society. I think I would feel much better there” (D., who emigrated to Canada in 2001).

“In a few generations, nationalities will no longer exist.” (P., who emigrated in 1980).

These statements reflect the effects of globalization and cultural alienation. The space of origin seems easier to assimilate than the space of adoption, even if the material reality does not confirm it. Migrants reposition themselves in the transnational space, redefining “home” culturally, and showing a preference for social spaces with stronger cultural and historical affinities. Return is often mediated by how migrants are perceived in Romania. There is a persistent fear of stigmatization, labeling, or marginalization fueled by differences in mentality and lifestyle.

“When I returned, they were surprised that I wasn't wearing expensive jewelry.” (C., who emigrated in 2003).

“I want people to consider us Romanians as well” (V., who emigrated in 2008).

“I expect people in Romania to be friendly. I want sympathy.” (R., who emigrated to Canada in 2002)

These statements highlight the desire for reintegration into the symbolic community but also the risk of social exclusion of returnees, who are often considered “strangers in their own country.” Migrants who return to Romania for short visits often feel like “strangers at home.” They are categorized as different, and are even blamed for the problems of the system. Meanwhile, they expect empathy and respect from their fellow Romanians, and want to be treated as “friendly.”

A significant phenomenon identified in the interviews is social remittances, which are the transfer of norms, values, and behavioral models from the destination country to the country of origin. These remittances create higher expectations for Romania that are not always met. “We think very differently from each other now” (D., 1995); “Those from abroad are a loss, but also a gain” (V., who emigrated to Canada in 2008). These new values, such as meritocracy and civic sense, conflict with Romanian social norms, creating differences in perspective that complicate social reintegration.

The difference in vision between migrants and their acquaintances who stayed behind can erode the sense of belonging, complicate reintegration and reinforcing the impression of an irreversible break between the two worlds.

Conclusions

Return migration in the case of Romanians in Ontario, Canada, is present only as a voluntary return and according with the findings these no data regarding semi-voluntary, forced, temporary, or post-conflict relocation.

Return migration involves valuable economic and human capital. Returnees bring financial resources, such as remittances and savings, as well as human capital, including knowledge, international networks, and professional experience. This potential human capital can contribute to the development of entrepreneurship in Romania, and it is part of the transnationalism theory. Data retrieved from interviews emphasize the evolving connections with Romania from departure to the present.

Additionally, return migration should not be viewed solely as a permanent relocation; it can entail regular visits, seasonal migration, or commuting between Canada and Romania. These practices support active transnationalism, maintaining a permanent connection with both spaces.

On the other hand, structural theories help us understand why some Romanians are willing to wait and maintain the possibility of returning in the future due to institutional and systemic barriers in Romania. Throughout the interviews, we discovered that social remittances, the transfer of norms, values, and standards from Canada to Romania, generate a

critical attitude expressed through disappointment with its institutions and civic space. These high expectations create a difficult threshold for Romania to reach and increase uncertainty regarding reintegration.

The return migration of Romanians from Canada is influenced by objective factors that act as both attraction mechanisms (e.g., cost of living, property, and the private education system) and barriers to reintegration (e.g., the quality of institutions, the lack of meritocracy, and bureaucratic dysfunction). However, even when there is an objective attraction to Romania, the sustainability of the return is fragile. The lack of real progress in key areas, such as administration, infrastructure, and the professional environment, often makes the return transitory or exposes it to the risk of re-emigration.

The most significant objective barrier mentioned in the interviews relates to the quality of governance, as well as social and professional norms. The lack of meritocracy and civic sense and the conditioning of return on the existence of a “professional ethic and civic sense” directly manifest institutional and social dissatisfaction.

Administrative inconsistency and the “reminder” of systemic inefficiency, as seen in the comment, “Services have improved, but there are still situations that remind you of the previous period,” indicate that superficial improvements in public services (e.g., bureaucracy) have not completely eliminated systemic problems and difficulties in reintegration. The persistence of these “situations” maintains a high level of risk perceived by returning migrants.

The interviews suggest that Romanians with a long history abroad and accumulated capital intend to return, but this intention is based on life cycle factors and their own economic stability (e.g., housing and pensions). In contrast, the sustainability and stabilization of the return are called into question by objective institutional factors.

While return migration can be analyzed through economic or institutional lenses, the decision is often influenced by emotional factors and unresolved identity conflicts. Nostalgia, longing, uprootedness, and the need for recognition are recurring elements that fuel the motivation to return.

In parallel, the symbolic pressure of migratory success, mentalities, and the stigmatization of returnees can inhibit or postpone return migration.

Despite the aforementioned objective factors, return migration is not simply moving between two states; it involves navigating two emotional worlds, two identities, and two value systems. Therefore, we must acknowledge the presence of psychological and identity-based theories focusing on belonging, nostalgia, and cultural identity in the Canada–Romania returns migration paradigm. After conducting interviews, we concluded that people view return largely sentimentally and less objectively. During the discussions, most respondents treated the idea of return emotionally, hiding behind it a mixture of feelings and less objective appreciations.

Subjective factors often serve as the final catalyst for the decision to return, taking precedence over economic difficulties, at least in the case of migrants with stable financial resources. Despite material success, the psychological cost of uprooting generates a “minus” that strengthens the intention to return, especially when considering retirement.

Our research suggests that the return migration of Romanians to Canada is more of a latent potentiality than a numerical reality, present in the collective imagination, but not realized in action. This concept coexists with complex realities related to integration, stability, age, and social networks. Therefore, return remains an open option influenced by individual factors rather than classic migration patterns.

The decision to return is rarely permanent or purely rational. Structural and institutional barriers, such as weak governance, a lack of meritocracy, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, undermine the sustainability of return migration and increase the risk of re-emigration. Concurrently, emotional and identity-based motives, such as nostalgia, a sense of belonging, and unresolved cultural connections, often supersede economic considerations, particularly among individuals with stable financial situations.

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