

Place Attachment, Identities and Mobility Experiences. Evidence From a Left Behind Area in Romania

Apego al territorio, identidades y experiencias de movilidad. Evidencia de un territorio olvidado en Rumanía

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Left-behind areas are characterised by poor job prospects, disconnection from major urban centres, limited access to basic services, and a sense of discontent among residents. Major socioeconomic changes over the last decades (deindustrialisation, population ageing, out-migration) are believed to have disrupted place attachments and reframed identity, and that restoring them would contribute to the revitalisation of the areas.

In this paper, we investigate how migration experiences contribute to shaping local and national identity and place attachment in the case of a left behind area in Romania, a country with a rich experience of international migration after 1989, known as one of the most important sending countries and also one of the poorest within the EU, with significant regional disparities.

For this, we use qualitative data gathered within the Re-Place project, specifically interviews conducted with people in the case study area. In our analysis, we consider individuals' mobility trajectories and discuss identity and place attachment across three subgroups: non-migrants, internal in-migrants, and international in-migrants.

Contrary to our initial expectations, we found that exposure to alterity, especially through international migration, does not significantly narrow the content of national identity. Moreover, local identity and affective bonds to the community appeared more salient than national identity, with no differences between the three groups.



Abstract

Los territorios olvidados se caracterizan por la escasez de oportunidades laborales, una débil conexión con los principales centros urbanos, un acceso limitado a servicios básicos y un sentimiento generalizado de descontento entre sus habitantes. Los profundos cambios socioeconómicos de las últimas décadas —como la desindustrialización, el envejecimiento demográfico y la emigración— han transformado los vínculos con el lugar y redefinido las identidades locales. En este contexto, el fortalecimiento de dichos vínculos se presenta como un elemento clave para la revitalización de estos territorios.

Este artículo analiza cómo las experiencias migratorias contribuyen a configurar la identidad local y nacional, así como el vínculo afectivo con el territorio, en una zona olvidada de Rumanía. El caso rumano resulta especialmente relevante, pues desde 1989 el país ha experimentado una intensa emigración internacional y se ha consolidado como uno de los principales países de origen de migrantes en Europa. Al mismo tiempo, sigue siendo uno de los Estados miembros más pobres de la Unión Europea y presenta marcadas desigualdades regionales.

El análisis se basa en datos cualitativos recogidos en el marco del proyecto Re-Place, concretamente en entrevistas a residentes del área de estudio. A partir de sus trayectorias de movilidad, examinamos la identidad y el apego al lugar en tres subgrupos: personas sin experiencia migratoria, inmigrantes internos e inmigrantes internacionales.

Contrariamente a nuestras expectativas iniciales, los resultados muestran que la exposición a la alteridad, especialmente a través de la migración internacional, no reduce de manera significativa el peso de la identidad nacional. Asimismo, la identidad local y los vínculos afectivos con la comunidad emergen como dimensiones más relevantes que la identidad nacional, sin diferencias apreciables entre los tres grupos analizados.

National identity; local identity; place attachment; international mobility; internal mobility
Identidad nacional; identidad local; apego al lugar; movilidad internacional; movilidad interna



Key words

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1. Introduction

For post-communist areas struggling to find prosperity, intricate relations between people and places are key to unlocking growth. When the expectations of economic and political elites go unmet (De Ruyter et al., 2021), the gap between lagging, left behind regions and those that thrive breeds significant social discontent (MacKinnon et al., 2024). Leveraging local heritage and history can strengthen place identity (Schnell & Reese, 2003) and act as a catalyst for rural development. This sense of attachment contributes to shaping individual identity (Degnen, 2016), while also being a fundamental driver of community resilience and long-term well-being (Zwiers et al., 2018). Further on the relations between people and places, local and national identity are forms of social identity defined in reference to social bodies situated at different scales (nation states, respectively local communities) or ideas of who we

are as a group, what defines us and what separates us from others (Triandafyllidou, 1998, for national identity; Shao et al., 2017, for local identity). Concepts like boundaries and belonging are constituents of identity - constantly shifting and adapting to its surroundings (Madsen & van Naerssen, 2003). In this sense, national and local identities are different facets, at different scales, of the relation between people and places.

However, the movement of people across borders complicates matters related to identity, creating a complex tapestry of “otherness” (different instances and changing perceptions of the “other”). While existing literature extensively explores how migration reshapes identity in destination countries (Bielewska, 2023; Haikkola, 2011; Hernández et al., 2007), the story of the origin countries is often left untold.

We address this gap by examining how migration experiences shape national and local identity and attachment within a left-behind region of Romania. As one of the EU’s most significant sending countries since 1989, Romania provides a unique backdrop for this study. By adopting a place-based perspective, it becomes possible to enhance the understanding of feelings of belonging in areas that are often stigmatised or seen as worse off than others, as well as provide insights into the links between place attachment and different scales of identity (local, national). Through 34 interviews conducted for the Re-Place project, we compare three distinct groups to understand how place attachment and national and local identity intertwine and how they are influenced by experiences of (im)mobility: non-migrants (stayers), internal in-migrants (those who have moved within Romania to the study area) and international in-migrants (returnees and locals who are seasonal workers).

The paper begins with a section focused on relevant theoretical approaches to place attachment and local and national identity, especially in left-behind places and in relation to migration. This is followed by a description of the Romanian context, and sections on methodology and data analysis. The paper concludes with a discussion.

2. Theoretical approaches to place attachment and local and national identity

2.1. Connections between people and places in left-behind areas

In post-communist settings, expectations from the economic and political elites have failed to materialise across regions and social groups (De Ruyter et al., 2021). As a consequence, some areas prospered, most notably large urban centres, while others, like small cities and rural areas, are frequently lagging behind (Strat & Stefan, 2017), considered to be left behind—suffering from one or more material, demographic or social disadvantages, especially when compared to other areas (Fiorentino et al., 2024). This generates frustration and discontent, signs of which are visible in political behaviour, for example, through disengagement or a protest vote (MacKinnon et al., 2022), often linked to nationalist rhetoric based on the idea of losing/threatening national identity. Investments in hard infrastructure, although often slow-paced, have been the main strategy to counter left-behindness. However, recent research suggests that place attachment and place identity can influence place-related behaviour (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Belanche et al., 2017). Consequently, they can underpin alternative development models, offering the potential to significantly increase the well-being of residents in rural and left-behind areas (Schnell & Reese, 2003; MacKinnon et al., 2022). This only en-

hances the relevance of analysing attachment and identity contexts characterised by left-behindness, where local initiatives can lead to neo-endogenous development that combines local and external resources and ideas (Belliggiano et al., 2020).

2.2. Belonging to the local community and national identity

Place identity (e.g., being a New Yorker) is defined as the feeling of belonging to a community with geographically defined boundaries (Tartaglia & Rossi, 2015). It is conceived as a component of people's personal identity (Bonaiuto et al., 2002), referring to the role of geographical location in the conceptualisation of the self (Sandow, 2024, p. 38). It is linked to being part of a situated, place-based community (Belanche et al., 2021), in which the characteristics of the place are relevant to identity construction.

Place identity is generally used in conjunction with a series of concepts with overlapping meaning, such as “place attachment” and “sense of place.” What they have in common is that they all account for a psychological connection between people and place (Raymond et al., 2010; Belanche et al., 2017; Belanche et al., 2021). The overlap in meaning between the concepts is evident in their convergent dimensions, making it difficult to disentangle them. However, there is a broad consensus that place attachment refers to the affective/emotional bonds between people and place, and this is what we will refer to in the present paper. Moreover, we account for the fact that the meanings attributed to the place serve as the basis for attachment bonds (Carrasco-Cruz & Cruz-Souza, 2025) and that these meanings arise in interactions with people and places (Belanche et al., 2017).

Both national and local identity can be seen as instances of place identity, but with different referents. For instance, *local identity* can be read as place identity restricted at the local level (Belanche et al., 2021). In this sense, just as place identity, local identity is a multidimensional concept, containing a physical aspect (related to the environment and how people interact with it); a social aspect—people's investment in the place, through social activity; a sensory aspect—linked to individual lives conducted in a certain place, bonds that develop through experience; a memory aspect—heritage, traditions (Shao et al., 2017). It has been investigated in relation to various elements, such as environmental attitudes (Bonaiuto et al., 2002), the use of linguistic dialects (Sandow, 2024), leisure practices and the inclusion of immigrants in destination communities (Lynnebakke, 2024). In these and other studies, local identity and place identity seem to be deeply related concepts, if not equivalents in use (see, for example, Sandow, 2024). In the following, we use these concepts interchangeably—we do not expect to create confusion, since the local in our analysis is a defined community, a specific place.

In a similar way to local identity, national identity has a double-edged character, straddling who belongs to the national community and who is a foreigner (Triandafyllidou, 1998, pp. 593-594). Deepening the analysis of the dynamics between national in-groups and out-groups, Triandafyllidou (1998) shows that, over time, national identity is redefined in reference to significant others in response to perceived threats to the nation.

National identity and local identity are not mutually exclusive, and their contents as categories of practice (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) sometimes overlap, are used interchangeably and reinforce one another. They are pervasive even when supra-national references for identity construction exist, such as the European Union (Triandafyllidou, 1998; Fligstein et al., 2012). With regard to national identity, its contents are closely linked to the concept of nationalism.

Hans Kohn introduces a dichotomy of nationalism: Western, or civic nationalism, emphasising the state, and Eastern, or ethnic nationalism, emphasising ancestry (Kohn, 1944/2005). Another similar dichotomy is that between primordial and instrumental ideal types of nation and nationalism, in which the former category encapsulates ethnic elements, while the latter refers to more pragmatic elements linked to the state rather than the nation, emphasising nationalism as constructed and performed (for detailed analyses of these concepts, see, for example, Bačová, 1998; Rusu, 2009; Rusu, 2021). The more civic orientation views nations/national identity as constructed, and is focused on concepts such as “citizenship” and what can be done in order for that specific national identity to be obtained, while in the more ethnic or ethnocentric orientation nation/national identity is a natural given and emphasizes commonalities in terms of ethnicity, language and traditions (Rusu, 2009; Fligstein et al., 2012). While in the civic understanding, national identity is performed, adhered to, and can be obtained by others, in the ethnic understanding, one has national identity as a direct consequence of being born into a nation (Kohn, 1944/2005; Fligstein et al., 2012; Larsen, 2017). In Romania, elements from both perspectives were found, suggesting a mix, rather than a dichotomous understanding/representation of nation/national identity (Rusu, 2020, 2021).

In parallel, local identity can also vary in its inclusiveness towards outsiders, although it is typically considered more flexible and has been found to facilitate the inclusion of newcomers (Bielewska, 2023), being less dependent on categorisations that contrast with other groups. However, Tartaglia & Rossi (2015) consider that, along with its psychological function, which is grounding and offers stability amidst the uncertainties of globalisation, local identity can also have a political function, which can be channelled in nationalism.

Another connection between the national and the local levels is presented by Wong et al. (2021), who show that the prominence of local or national identity depends on the strength of belonging to the local or the national. However, the two identities are not treated as binaries and do not exclude each other. Rather, people seem to use one or the other depending on context (Bielewska, 2023).

The connection between local and national identities notwithstanding, some studies suggest a certain degree of stability in the definitions of national identity and in the connection between the local and national levels in defining it. For example, in exploring the aforementioned civic-ethnic ideal-types of nationalism and national identity, Lazëri & Coenders (2023) and Lazëri et al. (2024) show that the contents of national identity provided by non-migrants with minority status in their cities/neighbourhoods align with wider representations at the national level.

Finally, while both types of identity can be channelled for alternative development, they can also be used by far-right ideologies to sharpen distinctions between the in-group and the others. For instance, the rise of far-right parties in Europe relies heavily on issues related to immigration and attempts to keep nations pure, unaltered by individuals with different cultural backgrounds (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). Similarly, local identity can be used to fuel a conflict between left-behind peripheral areas and places perceived as central (Ford & Goodwin, 2014).

2.3. The role of mobility

Particularly relevant to the present study, territorial identity is fluid, and place itself is negotiated and constructed through movement and interaction (Gilmartin, 2008). Territorial identity changes in relation to exposure to mobility (as an actor or in interaction) by incorporating new elements and/or buttressing one's own heritage (Madsen & van Naerssen, 2003). In other words, in interaction with people and places, identity is moulded through proactive and reactive processes. Similarly, Schnell & Reese (2003) present sense of place and place attachment as constructed and maintained, emphasising the process, rather than the substantive result.

Different authors have shown that context is important for identity construction and recognition (Triandafyllidou, 1998; Haikkola, 2011; Andreouli & Howarth, 2013; Šūpule & Klave, 2018; Lazēri & Coenders, 2023; Lazēri et al., 2024). Examples of contextual factors include: the geopolitical situation, which can trigger definitions of significant others as threats to national identity and thus contribute to adapting its contents (Triandafyllidou, 1998); the transnational and the local, in the case of families with a migration background (Haikkola, 2011); the personal migration experience (Šūpule & Klave, 2018); the local landscape of diversity in the broader national one (Lazēri & Coenders, 2023; Lazēri et al., 2024). National identity has been more often explored in relation to migration, as a specific context, albeit mostly in destination countries, with an emphasis on integration and identity recognition (Andreouli & Howarth, 2013). Among the examples of studies focusing on the situation at the origin, upon return, are Šūpule & Klave (2018), analysing national identity as linked to the idea of home in the context of Latvian return migration; Sussman (2010) and Lados et al. (2023) showing that migration can trigger identity changes in relation to the country of origin, visible upon return.

Our analysis does not mean to add to the reifying power of identity as a category of analysis. Rather, we intend to explore it as a category of practice (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) by investigating its contents and definitions formulated by individuals with and without migration experiences. Based on the perspectives presented here, our expectations were structured around the idea that international migration contributes to manifesting clearer, more specific understandings of national identity. In the case of international in-migrants, due to their exposure to behavioural patterns and value orientations at the destination, we expected to find definitions of national identity involving the civic dimension, with concepts such as citizens' rights, state and state-individual relations, beside the ethnic dimension, bringing forward common ancestry or traditions. At the same time, we expected local identity to be rather diffuse and defined in broader terms in the case of internal and international in-migrants compared to non-migrants.

3. The Romanian context

Since the fall of Communism in 1989, Romania has undergone a dramatic demographic and economic transformation, making it one of the most significant sending countries in the European Union. Today, over 4 million Romanians—roughly 20% of the population—live and work abroad (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). This phenomenon was not uniform; rather, it was driven by deep internal disparities. While major cities like Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca have become hubs of concentrated wealth and resources, vast rural parts of the country remain left behind, struggling with systemic underdevelopment (Török, 2019; Strat & Stefan, 2017). The 1989 revolution and the collapse of state-led industry triggered a brief wave of

internal migration towards rural areas (Sandu et al., 2004). As deindustrialisation deepened in the 1990s, international migration emerged as a primary survival strategy (Sandu et al., 2006). Initially driven by social networks and local village ties (Şerban, 2011), this movement eventually shifted the values of those who left, introducing more “modern” or Westernised orientations (Sandu, 2010). What began as temporary, circular labour migration has evolved into a complex landscape of permanent settlement, return migration, and the difficult social reintegration of those coming home (Anghel & Coşciug, 2019; Croitoru, 2021).

In recent times, the Romanian diaspora was important for voter turnout in national elections (Parliamentary and Presidential). Historically, Romanians living abroad were seen as a progressive, liberalising force, often tipping the scales in national elections toward reformist candidates (Burean, 2018). It is considered to have a strong voice and to be able to shift the results in one direction or the other, including through its influence on Romanian non-migrants with friends or family abroad (Gherghina & Farcaş, 2024). However, recent elections have signalled an ideological pivot. In the most recent presidential cycle, the diaspora’s voice became closely associated with populist and sovereigntist rhetoric. The leading candidate among voters abroad—though ultimately unsuccessful—campaigns on a platform of traditional religious values and a national identity defined in opposition to the European Union. This shift suggests that for many “mobile” Romanians, the experience of living abroad has not erased their national or local attachments, but has instead reframed them through a lens of nostalgia or perceived cultural threat. Thus, an exploration of nation—and place—related identities, taking into account im(mobility), is even more relevant, and the Romanian context makes for a fruitful research site.

4. Methodology

The data used in this analysis was collected as part of the Horizon Europe project Re-Place—Reframing Non-Metropolitan Left Behind Places Through Mobility and Alternative Development. Fieldwork was conducted in April–August 2025 in a community in the Southern part of Romania, classified as left behind using a combination of two indices of human development, Local Human Development Index (LHDI)—at the level of locality, and Regional Human Development Index (RHDI)—at the NUTS3 level (Sandu, 2024a, 2024b). Prior to beginning data collection, the Ethics Committee at the Research Institute for Quality of Life approved the fieldwork.

The general goal of the research was to identify household strategies for facing the daily challenges of living in a left-behind area, with an emphasis on (im)mobility strategies and their impact. The interview guide comprised sections on place attachment/identity, household strategies, migration trajectories, future mobility and impacts of migration. Building on previous relations with local key informants developed in the earlier stages of the project, potential respondents were identified, contacted, and, whenever possible, interviewed and asked for recommendations of other research participants. There were also cases in which interviews were conducted with people approached at random by the researchers at various sites in the community, such as the store or the post office.

From the total of 48 interviews conducted within the project, we excluded the interviews with people no longer living in the area, leaving 34 interviews, out of which 10 were with

non-migrants,¹ 12 with international in-migrants² (7 returnees and 5 seasonal workers), and 12 with internal in-migrants³ (out of which 9 returnees). Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample. Information from 10 previously conducted interviews with local key informants within the project was also used for the present analysis.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were then coded in NVivo. The items in the interview guide served as the basis for the codebook, but additional codes were added after the initial reading of the transcripts for aspects/topics that were unscripted but occurred regularly in the dataset.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of interviewees

Type of interviewee	Internal in-migrant	International in-migrant	Non-migrant	Total
Age				
24-35	1	1	1	3
36-64	7	9	4	20
65-77	4	2	5	11
Gender				
Women	9	7	8	24
Men	3	5	2	10
Marital status				
Married/Living with partner	8	7	3	18
Single/Divorced/Separated/ Widowed	4	5	7	16
Level of education				
Secondary education	11	12	8	31
Tertiary education	1	0	2	3

Source: Own elaboration

Most studies on identity and identification among migrants focus on what happens at the destination, while those situated at the origin lack a place-based approach. Our study is focused on a specific community at the origin and on how different types of mobility (international or internal) impact understandings and definitions of national and local identity, as well as the coordinates of place attachment. Research participants are brought together by

1 Non-migrants are people who were born in the case study area and have not lived anywhere else for more than three months (except for periods of studies and mandatory army training).

2 International in-migrants are people who moved into the case study area from abroad at least three months prior to the interview. This category includes, in a parallel terminology, international returnees, as well as international seasonal workers living in Romania at the time of the interview.

3 Internal in-migrants are people who moved into the case study area from another locality in Romania at least three months prior to the interview. This category includes internal returnees.

their living in the same community, and subsamples are constituted based on the individual (im)mobility experiences/strategies: internal in-migrants, international in-migrants and non-migrants. This allows us to isolate the impact of migration/mobility on national and local identities and people's attachment to the places they live in by comparing the three groups mentioned above.

5. Results

5.1. The community

The research was conducted in a rural community in the South of Romania, in one of the country's less developed regions. With almost 2300 inhabitants (National Institute of Statistics, 2021), the commune includes three villages situated within walking distance from each other. The population is ageing and declining, as in most rural localities in Romania, and is homogeneous in terms of ethnicity (Romanians) and religious affiliation (Orthodox). There was consensus among the respondents on the scarcity of jobs and economic development opportunities in the commune. While many locals commute to jobs in the county capital, agriculture, including animal husbandry, is the most important economic activity in the commune. However, the organisation of agricultural labour has changed over time, together with the predominant forms of property (from individual properties, to collective property in agricultural cooperatives of production—CAPs—during communism, then back to individual property). Land owned and, until a few years ago, worked individually/within households is now leased to agricultural associations, which mechanically grow and harvest the crops and redistribute part of them back to the owners.

When asked about what is most specific to the community, interviewees pointed to a popular ritual dance called *Căluș*, performed in the period surrounding a religious holiday celebrated in spring/early summer (*Rusalii*/Pentecost). Specific to the South of Romania, it is part of UNESCO's World Heritage and strongly associated with Romanian identity (Fircă, 2010). This tradition continues to be deeply rooted within the local community; dance courses are organised for both school children and adults, and there are locally constituted dance teams that perform in competitions at county, national, and international levels. Even during the communist period, the community ensemble was an important cultural and folkloric entity, receiving attention, funding, and support from the authorities. This is an illustration of the Communist regime's use of folklore to reinforce national identity and pride and foster unity (Oancea, 2015).

The sense of belonging fostered by such traditions coexists with the economic realities of post-communist Romania. While the dance preserves a sense of historical continuity, the community has come to depend on a high degree of physical mobility. Within the community, international migration is a complex phenomenon, linking the origin to multiple destinations through an array of mobility trajectories/strategies. In the first decade after 1989, long-term migration directed mainly towards Spain, but also towards Italy, emerged. Over time, new destinations emerged, including Germany, the Netherlands, France, the UK, and Austria. A new mobility pattern took shape: seasonal migration in agriculture and circular migration mostly to Spain and Germany. Internal migration to the city for studies and for work, as well as circulation back and forth, is also a significant mobility strategy. Estimates from key infor-

migrants put the number of both long-term international migrants and international returnees at around 50, while the number of seasonal migrants is said to be smaller, but still above 20-30 people. Our findings show that, in terms of international mobility, things are far from simple or easily quantifiable: there are situations in which people mix destinations and have multiple departures per year, towards multiple destinations, or cases of households with multiple experiences of both long-term and seasonal migration. While migration from the community is a fluid phenomenon, including return and sometimes departure towards new destinations, immigration, as a mechanism for encountering/being exposed to otherness, is absent: those who move within the community are either returnees or people from neighbouring localities.

5.2. Between stigma and not being ashamed of being Romanian

During the fieldwork, questions about the importance and meaning/content of national identity often prompted answers that seemed defensive, centred on the idea of not being ashamed to be Romanian and emphasising that being Romanian is important in one's life. This is associated with at least two distinct factors: the commonly known fact that sometimes Romanians are not seen as trustworthy, which is also present in the media and in public debates, and the temporal proximity between the fieldwork and the Romanian presidential elections, in which populism framed as a manifestation of national identity was a salient and divisive topic (Cistelean et al., 2025).

The first factor became evident: when discussing national identity, respondents often appealed to how they perceive other groups (nationalities) see Romanians. There is the internalised knowledge that Romanians have a negative image for nationals of other countries, and are often discriminated against. Research participants cite these references as common knowledge, noting that many Romanians have gone to work and live abroad, and some have engaged in morally questionable behaviour. However, even if such negative stereotypes are implicitly brought into the interview interaction/conversation as understandable, clarifications on escaping said stereotypes through hard work are also provided:

As “extranher”⁴ [a foreigner], we have a very... reputation, that is, a connotation, but the reputation is also made by Romanians. That they steal, that they bring others to the subway and beg, that Romanians do a lot of stupid things abroad. Maybe poverty makes them, but no, no, no, there are also calculated people, people who mind their own business, people who have done very well for themselves. (Woman in her 60s, international in-migrant)

Another source of prejudice resides in the communist past of Romania, leading to a specific mentality that differs from what is characteristic in other parts of Europe that are usual destinations for Romanian migrants. Leaving the ways of the past behind and making a systematic change is perceived as difficult in practice. At the same time, this difficult transition somehow reinforces perceptions of Romanians as different from people from other (destination) countries.

⁴ This is the exact transcription of the interviewee's pronunciation, which is based on the Spanish word *extranjero*.

Experiences of (shorter/seasonal or long-term) working and living abroad complement this perspective by offering accounts of how realities and mentalities differ there, and how these differences manifest in everyday life, such as working at a different pace, labour relations, and various administrative aspects. These references, either ample and highly elaborated or inserted into the conversations as brief instances of how life is there, helped differentiate international immigrants from the other interviewees. These precautions are either felt by Romanians in their initial interactions with natives or attributed to a diffuse idea of “foreigner” in more developed countries. However, conclusive remarks are given, stating the fact that, if you work hard, you succeed and that people treat you well everywhere as long as you are a man of your word. In the case of international in-migrants (returnees and seasonal workers alike), the common narrative centres on the gains associated with their migration experience, allowing them much more in terms of investments in the household: “But everything we did, we did using money earned in the Netherlands, not in Romania, not in three lifetimes in Romania” (man in his 40s, international in-migrant).

The second potential source of uneasiness in discussing the topic of national identity is that the time of the research might have been relevant as well, partially overlapping with the presidential elections. These last rounds of elections were embedded in discourses about nationalism and in dichotomies between the authentic “Us,” with an emphasis on traditions, religion and Romanian identity, and “Them,” the others, also Romanians, who want to spoil this national authenticity and promote contrary/conflicting ideas, rooted more in woke ideologies than in the Orthodox teachings. For example, for being a patriot, a concept that is associated by respondents with the Romanian national identity, various instances were found in the interviews. It can come accompanied by a discursive detachment from politics by the research participant—“What does it mean... I don’t know, to be patriotic? Although I, with politics, I don’t get involved, I’m not interested” (woman in her 50s, international in-migrant), or as part of discursive constructions of nationalistic nostalgia, linking a past in which people used to be patriots with an uncertain future, via the present juncture: “Yes, we are led, so I say, my opinion. We were Romanians once, and we were patriots for this country, but now everyone is... We will see, from now on, what will come and what will be” (woman in her 30s, internal migrant).

5.3. Living in Romania as a marker of national identity

A clear distinction between immobile respondents and those with mobility experience refers to country/origin-related resilience. Remaining in your country of birth is cited by non-migrants in interviews as one indicator of the importance of national identity. What makes one Romanian, along with the traditions, the language you speak and other inherited traits, is that you live in Romania. This perspective can come accompanied by the conviction that there is no place better than your home country—“So [better] stay there in your country. I don’t think it’s anywhere better than in your country. I don’t think so. I wouldn’t have gone anywhere” (woman in her 70s, non-migrant). Some go further and associate international migration with abandonment of one’s country for financial reasons. In this case, international migration is seen as an exit strategy adopted by youth with financial ambitions who are willing to go to great lengths to earn money. “That you live in your Romanian country, you don’t leave like these young people do, I understand that, poor fellows, go to the bottom of the earth, for money, for that” (woman in her 50s, non-migrant). The excerpt exemplifies a very common stance regarding migration—that younger people tend to migrate, while those settled in their

lives here usually try to find ways to get by locally. General qualifications about migrants in this discourse are often associated with young people, in a way that their age and ambition to earn money are said to explain, if not justify, their leaving home. The fact that this type of conviction, framed this adamantly, is most common among non-migrants, who were, on average, slightly older than in-migrants, might also be a result of the respondents' life stage and their immobility trajectory.

References to living in Romania also appeared in interviews with migrants. However, they are constructed differently in respondents' discourses, less as passive and immutable, and more like active instances in people's lives, accompanied by other traits or markers. It is not a matter of *staying* in your country, but of *living* there: "What does it mean to be Romanian? Well, what does it mean? That you were born Romanian. That you were born Romanian, that you speak Romanian, that you live in Romania" (woman in her 60s, internal in-migrant).

The importance of traditions, ancestry and place-based family ties was emphasised in the interviews, in relation to national identity and being Romanian. The latter is commonly presented as a given, a part of one's destiny, and intrinsically important in one's life: "Now, we are all Romanians, we cannot go back on our word. Once you are Romanian, you have to respect the nation and the traditions" (man in his 40s, international in-migrant). This is seen by the respondents as being true for all nations and national identities, based on the same principle of being born into a certain nation, and into a country that holds the most important attributes, especially beautiful and manifold scenery and resources, rooted in familiarity and having an emotional rather than a cognitive basis.

In this context, experiences of international migration seemed to have offered new spaces for encountering fellow Romanians, on the one hand, and people of other nationalities, especially natives of the countries of destination. It thus led to the discovery of other social environments, with their own sets of rules and traditions, and to new ways of enacting local belonging, proving that each nation (people) has its own specificities. At the same time, it seems to have catalysed a more instrumental perspective on what it means to be Romanian: a shared language translates into shared experiences and time spent together at the destination, contradicting negative perceptions of Romanians as hard-working and disciplined. Moreover, meeting other Romanians in a foreign context often triggers a sense of shared belonging that might be difficult to articulate. In these moments, everyday items like clothing or jewellery become signals of national identity, acting as a shorthand that makes Romanians identifiable to one another.

5.4. Local identity between pride and (internalised) prejudice

When saying where they are from, local identity is dominant for the majority of interviewees, but they consider the context of interaction and choose to activate the local or regional identity depending on where the interaction would take place and the perceived knowledge of the discussant, as explained by Bielewska (2023). Imagining such interaction contexts, some respondents were assessing if people are likely to know about the place and if not they would present it as the birth place of the traditional dance *Călușul* ("the mother of the Romanian and [referring to the region] Oltenian Căluș" - man in his 50s, international in-migrant), expecting the interlocutor to have heard of it from television, since "Călușul became [like] a mass sport" (man in his 60s, internal in-migrant). This observation is in line with theoretical

developments on folklore as a tool for (local and national) identity affirmation during communism (see, for example, Oancea's detailed analysis [2015]).

Most people appealed to facts to support their connection to the place, referring to the commune as the place of birth or where they were raised, and also as a place for other important life events, such as marriage. Some invoked the names of public figures born in the community as a source of local prestige. Both discursive mechanisms point to the need to justify feelings of belonging, anchoring them in facts unrelated to the community's (current) characteristics. These accounts coexist with others, provided by people who expressed positive feelings as justification for their local place identity, such as "ondness" for the place or pride in being from there, passed down through generations.

For some in-migrants, official documentation was important, and they spontaneously mentioned whether they had permanent residence there. Some examples include a 70-year-old internal migrant who said she is from the commune, even though her permanent residence remained in the nearby city. In another case, despite living for many years with her partner in the commune, the lack of a formal proof of residence prompted another internal migrant to say she would present herself as being from the locality where she was born. However, this might not reflect day-to-day attitudes or ways of making sense of belonging, but rather evidence of a particular understanding of researchers' activities. In other words, respondents might have also been preoccupied with disclosing the formal truth—what is written in official documents.

Another type of spontaneous answer to this question suggested surprise, particularly among non-migrants, possibly indicating internalised prejudice against the place as a rural area in the region. A few migrants and almost all non-migrants replied with questions like "Why not [say I'm from here]?" / "Why wouldn't I say it?" / "Should I say something else?" / "Where else [would I be from]?" They generally followed up by saying they do not feel ashamed of saying so/being from there, or that it "doesn't bother" them.

5.5. The local within the national or the other way around

The national and the local seem to overlap, both substantively and in people's reactions to questions of attachment and identity. One possible explanation relies on the former's main content, centred on traditions, and the prominence of the popular dance *Căluș* in the community. The emotional knowledge of the place, associated with memories and past experiences, appears in interviews. Social interactions constitute an important part of living in the community, and their extent and depth are often associated with living in communities with other Romanians, with whom one shares traditions and language as the basis for the fabric of daily life.

Apart from appeals to tradition and personal/collective memory to explain place specificity, people often brought up comparisons with (mostly surrounding) urban areas—both in-migrants and non-migrants—and sometimes with living abroad, in the case of international in-migrants or people who had visited other countries. This opposition to the urban and the foreign was translated into binary pairs such as "trapped" in the city/abroad—"free" in the countryside/in the commune, noise in the city/stillness in the village, going abroad for money/staying in the community. In so doing, on the one hand, they make the commune an exemplar of Romanian rural areas in general, and, on the other hand, some idealise it and seem to imply that these places preserve the authenticity of Romanians.

Hard work is presented as an important feature of life in the area or community and as a means of ensuring all necessities are covered. This idea appeared when discussing both national and local identity. Romanians who are hardworking defy prejudice and discrimination abroad and ultimately succeed, thus making this a national trait. The same process of ascribing traits of reliability and dedication takes place at the local level. Here, the rather individualistic stance that those who do not have enough or cannot get by are unwilling to work was a common element of the interviews, regardless of respondents' characteristics, including their mobility experiences/trajectories. This perspective was widespread and can be an indicator of a coping mechanism generated by living in a left-behind area: in the absence of structural opportunities, individuals remain the only bearers of responsibility for their own well-being. At the same time, it exemplifies an ideological position that is characteristic of former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, characterised by low levels of redistribution and few resources dedicated to social protection, and seeing those in need as unworthy and to blame, rather than legitimate recipients of state help (Chelcea & Druță, 2016):

working, who are less so, who are lazy and there are also very lazy [people]. Well, what to get out of... If you want to tell him... So they don't have the work ethic, the work. No, so for them it's something... And you know, but here, that's the big problem. They don't encounter... those who want to and are hardworking, they don't encounter problems, of any kind. (Man in his 50s, international in-migrant)

Respondents usually give examples from their own lives to illustrate this point, and these examples are sometimes followed by the realisation that times have changed in terms of general living conditions, expectations, and levels and ways of engagement with work, as well as with the community. Labour has become increasingly decoupled from the land, part of a shift away from nature-dependent livelihoods. At the same time, traditions became less present in the community's life due to a withdrawal of individual involvement. Accounts of past times, when the streets were filled with children and youth, are recurrent, especially during religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter, events that would bring the whole community together.

5.6. Place attachment

For most research participants, with and without migration experience, the main affective connection is to the local community, the place where they feel at home. In these cases, the reference in the discussion is either the house/household or the commune/village. While non-migrants seem to be attached primarily to the household, not necessarily the commune, in the case of in-migrants both references appear. Moreover, there is no discursive difference between international and internal migration experiences. Romania, as the home country, also appeared in some of the interviews, regardless of interviewees' (im)mobility status. In even fewer situations of conflicting relations to the place, the discursive reference was the wider community and the local authorities:

Somehow, I feel that here is home, but I was very disappointed, so very much, the commune, the people in the commune. In general, they are people for themselves, in our commune those who have money and, I don't know, animals, something, they have more power than those who don't have the power to give money, to give... bribery to the authorities. (Woman in her 30s, international in-migrant)

Investment in a house was considered a sign of place attachment. Both internal and international in-migrants and non-migrants appeared to see migration of people who keep their houses, visit, and return as a livelihood strategy compatible with place attachment at the origin. However, buying a house abroad is seen as a sign of severed ties with the origin community, mostly by young people. In-migrants who spent a longer time abroad or in another part of the country give coherence to their place attachment discourse by saying that the physical departure was paralleled by a mental/emotional stay at the origin: “my thoughts were always at home” (man in his 50s, international in-migrant). Moreover, they see their attachment to place as an integral part of themselves: (“Maybe I’m a person who can’t stay anywhere else. Others no [are not like that]..., but I don’t... So still at... to the homeplace I returned, to my parents’ house” - woman in her 50s, international in-migrant, or of their generation. This way of framing place attachment in migration and return allows for explanations for other people’s migration trajectories.

Alternatively, home may not be a well-defined place but rather a mix of place and personal relations. As one respondent put it, home is “not a stable place,” but “wherever I am with my partner” (woman in her 20s, internal in-migrant). The presence of the immediate family is one of the elements that seems to contribute to people’s connection to a certain place, a connection that is disrupted by major events, such as the death of parents.

The interviewees who were not born in the commune (generally women who came by marriage) feel part of the community. Their integration is attributed to personal characteristics (being sociable and attentive in interaction with others), initial expectations and experiences, and interactions during their stay there. The locals’ characteristics are also mentioned, and for those who feel at home in the commune, the others are hardworking, welcoming, and willing to help when needed. However, some respondents had an ambivalent attitude towards the place, having been born in the community but living abroad, or having a mix of internal and international experiences. For them, the others are gossipers and envious. The source of these tensions seems to have been either reinforced negative perceptions of the place formed in early life, and a consequence of a constrained decision to return to the village, or poor interactions with the people and the local authorities. While the *where* of the home is easier to identify, it is difficult for respondents to pinpoint *what* exactly home is (“I don’t know, life, people, the community, I don’t know” - woman in her 30s, internal migrant). They often emphasise the complex link between the place where they “lived (so) many years” and their life-course, and describe it as a place of birth, of growing up, of going to school, of early friendships, of marriage and family formation. For non-migrants, this is the place that contains their entire life; for internal migrants and some returnees, it is a place they “grew accustomed to” or “learned to be in.” Either way, the community and the household are places that seem inextricably linked to the lifeworlds of the in-migrants and non-migrants as well, to the extent to which, for many, it is difficult to imagine life elsewhere. Concomitantly, it is not only a place of relations and memories, but also a place infused with feelings of belonging, emotional attachment, familiarity and comfort, a life routine that is fulfilling. It is described as unique, incomparable to anything else and the best that there is for them, even when recognising that, in objective terms, from a financial or services point of view, it might be better somewhere else.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In the studied community, the variation in (im)mobility strategies is not mirrored by variation in national and local identities as categories of practice. In all the investigated issues (national identity, local identity, place attachment), a combination of not being ashamed and being proud was evident in respondents' discourses, often framing individuals as representatives of their country of origin wherever they go. Similar to Byrne (2018), how people see migration is linked to how they understand and how they perform local identity and place attachment: nurturing ties with the place, making investments there, and improving their conditions in the community of origin.

Romanianness is perceived almost as a binding contract: you are born in Romania, and as such, you do a number of things (follow traditions, respect your ancestors, love your country), which, apart from obligations, are also a birthright. There are no extensive differences between the three groups, non-migrants, internal in-migrants and international in-migrants, when it comes to the dimensions associated with national and local identity. Using Kohn's (1944/2005) distinction, we found that national identity is defined along ethnic, rather than civic lines. The predominance of national identity as a given and something individuals are born into somewhat diverges from Rusu's (2020, 2021) quantitative findings, which point to the co-presence of ethnic and civic elements. This difference might be related to the specific context of the community analysed here, characterised by homogeneity and a lack of experiences of otherness, in contrast with the variance observed at the national level. At the same time, it might be the case that the civic perspective, centred on the achievable character of national identity, is more likely to be strictly associated with countries of destination, social spaces that host significant diversity, and less transferable in left-behind, homogeneous communities, with no international in-migrants other than returnees. The returnees themselves, brought up in a community and in a country that has not been sought after by outsiders, might have been less prone to revisit the contents of (Romanian) national identity, thereby making its borders more permeable. Civic elements appear especially in the interviews conducted with internal and international in-migrants, along with comparisons between Romania and the countries of destination, where the relations between the state and the individuals are settled on different, more effective, inclusive and respectful grounds. What is often highlighted by international in-migrants is that, at the destination, immigrants were treated just as nationals in the provision of services within institutional settings.

The new contents brought by international migration to national identity (Madsen & van Naerssen, 2003), such as certain ways of dressing or behaving in certain situations, complement, not substitute, the pre-existing ones. These are only visible/apparent abroad, in a context dominated by otherness, when comparisons between groups are not only possible, but inherent. At the other end of the mobility spectrum, there were various instances in which non-migrants emphasised *staying in their country* as part of being Romanian, placing it within the umbrella of national identity. This was implicitly presented as resilience, as being true to your roots and as wisdom that goes beyond the superficial quest for easy financial gains. It might also be a rationalisation of one's immobility as a life trajectory/strategy, coupled with one's deservingness as a good Romanian.

In the understandings and definitions of local identity, the social, sensory, and memory aspects, as presented by Shao et al. (2017), were most evident. Contrary to our initial expectations, we found no difference between international and internal in-migrants or non-migrants when it comes to local identity and its relation to national identity. The former does not seem

to become more diffuse, less poignant than the latter as a result of experiences of living and working abroad. On the contrary, the discursive emphasis was placed on the local, rather than national identity; respondents with mobility experiences often emphasised the continuity of their local identity and place attachment while away. Thus, the role of the local in people's identification is central (Lynnebakke, 2024).

A significant overlap between local and national identities was evident among respondents across all three groups, regardless of their (im)mobility trajectories, consistent with the idea of local identity as an element of stability (Tartaglia & Rossi, 2015). Both national and local identities are rooted in traditions and the idealised national space/rural area. At this point, a potential bias might be that returnees actually returned to their community of origin because of their similarity in terms of ties to the place and understandings of local and national identity with those who do not have international migration experiences. Thus, adding international out-migrants to the comparison might make the findings more relevant to the impact of international migration on definitions of national and local identity.

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