

“I want to be a pioneer” - Young ambition in Bucharest and London

One in five young people - around 5.5 million citizens - in the EU are unable to find work; many more do jobs for which they are overqualified. Youth unemployment regularly hits the headlines across Europe - but what are the stories behind the statistics? A report from Bucharest and London

It's early autumn, and thoughts are on new beginnings, as students in Bucharest prepare for a new academic year. Across the country though, Romanians are looking back on 25 years of freedom and democracy. Past and future, opportunity and frustration rub shoulders in the capital, with its mix of crumbling facades and kitsch new-build constructions; luxury cars zip along four-lane thoroughways, only to be approached by beggars at the intersections. And everywhere, the energy of young people - too young to have seen the fall of the communist regime: for a decent, well-paid job, they all tell you, Bucharest is the place to be.

At the Grozavesti campus, students are trickling back to university. Some, like Dragos and Octavian, both 24 years old, have spent the summer here. Dragos has just finished his first year of philosophy, a course he chose for pragmatic reasons.

“I've always asked myself a lot of questions - and also, I didn't have a place to stay”, he tells us. “So I filled in a form, got into university, got a place here – perfect. I don't know if this year I'll do the same, because I don't want to go to school, I want to work in the field I like. Philosophy won't get me anywhere, I think.” When he first came to Bucharest, Dragos worked as a driver, he says. “I was delivering things: cookies, macaroons.” Later, he found a job as a games tester, closer to his dream job in audio production. And that dream: in Romania, or abroad? “I haven't decided yet”, he says.

For his friend Octavian, studying law means his only option is to stay in Romania. Meanwhile, he says, “as a summer job, I work for a phone company. The main reason I wanted this job is to buy a motorcycle.” Octavian doesn't share the gloom around youth unemployment. “After [the age of] 40 to 45 it is difficult to get a job”, he says, adding: “This year there will be presidential elections - youth unemployment is not so much in the media.”

Corina, a 23 year-old geography student, is less convinced. “I don't know what I am going to do, because there aren't so many opportunities. No one offers you a job if you don't have experience.”

Her dream job is a travel agent, but dreams don't feature in her immediate plans. She worked the past four years as a sales assistant for fashion store Zara in Bucharest, she tells us. “I applied for Zara Dubai and if they call me, I'll go there. Because the salaries are better and because I want to do something different.”

Go west

Since the fall of communism in 1989, Romanians have looked abroad - especially to Italy, Spain, and the UK - for opportunities. There are no definitive figures showing how many Romanians have left the country, but the Ministry of Labour estimates that more than 2 million Romanians are currently working legally abroad, most in EU countries.

Among them is Laura Chilintan, 23, who left Romania four years ago to study Sociology in the UK.

“As I didn’t want to become an engineer, lawyer, actor or doctor, there were almost no options in Romania for high-quality and well-recognised further study,” she says. “Sociology was forbidden during communism, so I wasn’t expecting much from studies in this domain.” Her dream job, she says, is to work with small, marginalised communities in Romania; for now, she’s employed by a local homelessness charity in London.

Romanians (and Bulgarians) were allowed to travel visa-free to the UK from 2007, when they joined the EU, but restrictions were placed on the kind of jobs they could take. The end of those restrictions in January 2014 prompted fears of an influx of workers seeking better pay. Those fears turned out to be unfounded. The discrepancy between earnings in the UK and Romania remains stark, though, with the minimum monthly wage in the former at €1,249.85 (£975.96) in 2013, compared to just €157.50 (£122.90) in the latter.

Young entrants to the jobmarket in the UK don’t necessarily feel lucky, though. And even the highly educated can feel apprehensive.

Tianyan Xu, 24, was born in China to Chinese parents; last year, she got a place on a competitive graduate scheme with British Telecom - but says that her generation, graduating in the last five years just, as the financial crisis hit, can feel paralysed by the competition. Many of her friends, she explains, gave up trying after a few unsuccessful attempts at the difficult application process.

“Jumping through the hurdles is quite annoying - it’s not just based on your skills and your abilities, it’s based on perception. Whatever you have, you have one chance to show that”, she says.

Her friend Adeola Adeyemo, 24, has a master’s degree and several internships behind her, and longs to work in publishing. Yet, she says, “my dream job’s apparently impossible... I feel a bit thwarted, but I’m not sure what I can do about it. It feels like you’re banging your head against a brick wall. On paper I have enough experience. I guess it’s an oversupply of qualified people and not enough jobs.” She has delayed her dream while working in sales, she tells us, adding: “I would like to know I can work back into [publishing]... but I also don’t know how I could, from where I am.”

Tianyan and Adeola, of course, are among the luckier ones - because across the EU, over 20% of young people are unemployed, double the rate for all age groups combined and nearly three times the rate for the over-25s. 7.5 million people aged 15 to 24 are not in employment, education or training (so-called ‘NEETs’) - while some 2 million vacancies across the EU

remain unfilled. The EU has promised 6 billion euro to support regions most affected by joblessness - the figure sounds huge, until one considers the costs: NEETs are estimated to cost the EU €153 billion (1.21% of GDP) a year in benefits and lost earnings and taxes.

Getting help - but from where?

How do we change that? Help young people to build the right skills, believes Cristian Ionescu from BPI Group Romania, a firm implementing an EU-funded pilot project to get 2500 young NEETs into work.

“There is a mismatch between the education system and what employers really need”, he says. There’s also a mismatch of expectations: employers complain that young jobseekers lack practical skills - yet, he says, “the expectations of youth regarding payment are not realistic”.

By offering apprenticeships, vocational training or entrepreneurship skills, in sectors that meet local industry demand (as electricians in industrial regions, or as bartenders in tourist areas), the project aims to fill some of those gaps. Yet even Cristian wonders how realistic it is to fulfil the EU’s Youth Guarantee, an initiative that’s trying to get every young European under 25 a good-quality, concrete offer within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed.

“I don’t think it’s feasible in countries like Romania, Greece, Portugal or Spain...Romania has one of the longest periods that a graduate spends from graduation to getting to the first job.”

Cristian Ionescu coordinates an EU-funded pilot project that aims to get 2500 16-24 year-olds, in four regions of Romania, into work. He explains why it’s hard for young people to break into the job market and why demand-led approaches are needed.
<https://vimeo.com/111152434>

For those still in education, schools and colleges in Romania don’t seem to offer much help to find work. Alexandru Nistor, a 21 year-old cybernetics student at the Academy of Economics Studies in Bucharest, found an internship as a web developer at Deutsche Telekom Romania on his own initiative. He reckons his college doesn't do enough to help students get the practical experience they need.

“There is mandatory training during university, but only with certain companies that have not so much to do with the profile of the faculty you are studying at. For example, because I study informatics, I should have done training at an IT company, but the university [only] has contracts with banks or more economics-focused companies.”

Some of his peers in London aren't much more positive. A musician and artist who goes by the DJ name Mob Mobs, aged 21, is studying business management because, he says, “I’d like to be able to incorporate that into my art so I can not only be appreciated for what I do

but also make money from it.” His experience of careers support is that “services are limited in London - there are not a lot of places you can go for extra help and the places that are there, nobody knows about,” he says.

Mob Mobs (21), a musician and artist who's been involved with the youth charity Raw Material in Brixton, London, talks about young people's career expectations and his own dreams for the future: <https://vimeo.com/111975228>

Mob Mobs is making the most of the classes at Raw Material, a music and media charity for young people in Brixton. But such services struggle to fund their work. Raw Material recently had almost 100% of its funding from the local authorities cut, according to Potent Whisper, a rap musician and one of the trainers and youth leaders there. Round the corner in Brixton is the Baytree Centre, which offers education and personal development services to women and girls, and has been running since the 1980s.

“We know so many similar organisations who've closed down - we are just about surviving,” says Christine Christofi, academic manager and English tutor at Baytree. The English classes the centre offers used to be free - serving the large immigrant population in the neighbourhood - but that's impossible now: government funding has all gone, she says.

Potent Whisper knows what it's like to be at the rough end of that job search. The musician - who's half Greek and half Irish, though born and raised in the UK - has had numerous jobs, from door to door fundraising to selling phone contracts or home insurance. And he becomes visibly riled when talking about his experience with job centres.

“I felt like a box that needed to be ticked, I felt like no one cared about me”, he says. No one wanted to genuinely help me, they just wanted to give me a certain amount of options to apply for, even if they weren't suitable for me. I don't think in my heart they really care whether we get the jobs or not.”

Breaking with tradition

Despite its long history of migration and the massive diversity that continues today, with over a third of London residents today having been born abroad - how you look and what you're called can stop you landing a job; at least, that's what many young migrants believe.

“I'm finding it difficult to find my career path because of my background”, says Abshir Ahmed, 24, a British citizen of Somali origin - the largest ethnic minority in the capital. He graduated a year ago in chemical engineering, but has been unable to break into the sector, and is currently working in logistics. “It's not an excuse, but I've had clear cases where people look at me and think I might not fit into this society or the group that they have.” Nor is this an isolated case, he believes. “A lot of my [Somali] friends that finished university together find it difficult to find a job. When you go to interviews people are a bit reluctant because they think, he has a Muslim name, he might not fit into the group.” And, Abshir says, it's more about who you know than what you know - something that puts his community at a

disadvantage. “It’s all about networking, [but] a lot of my family or community members are not in the workplace.”

Abshir (24), a second-generation Somali in London, graduated a year ago in chemical engineering, but can’t break into the industry. He tells us why:
<https://vimeo.com/111973763>

Faisa Abdi, 22, a student of African politics, agrees: “We’re the first ones to go to university”, she says. “Everyone else - their family’s got good connections”. Kafia Omar, 25, is happy with her job in a human rights organisation, but says she knows “a lot of people who struggled for a really long time to try and find something, and they feel it’s maybe their background or how they’re perceived that holds them back.”

For some young Somalis, parental expectations also have to be overcome. Iqraa Mohamed, 19, wants to study politics, but says her parents are “not keen” on the idea - partly because “mostly in parliament you see that it’s a male middle class and white dominated area.” But it’s also about her origins: “[Because] I’m from a war-torn country, [my parents] feel like I have privilege to be here and get education, so I should make the most of it - getting into politics is not making the most of it - the pay is not that high.”

Iqraa (19), a second-generation Somali in London, talks about her parents’ expectations for her career and explains why breaking into politics seems difficult -
<https://vimeo.com/111973118>

Faisa, also of Somali origin, felt the same pressure. “I studied international politics and every day my parents are sad about that!”, she laughs. “They tell me: there’s still time to change to do medicine. Even when I told them I’m going to do my master in politics, they were like: ‘Are you sure you don’t want to become a midwife?’ I hate blood!”

“Definitely some migrants feel they have to change their names to get a job interview”, says Anne Stoltenberg, a project manager at the London-based NGO Migrant Voice. Even the term ‘migrant’ itself has negative connotations (partly why EU officials prefer to talk about ‘mobility’ than migration). Yet, says Anne, “the reality is there is a first and second tier in Europe... it’s fine if you’re from Denmark, but not if from Romania. There isn’t an equal mobility in Europe.”

For Laura, though - as a young Romanian in the UK - it’s more about cultural differences than outright prejudice. “We are sometimes too assertive and I think British culture places emphasis on political correctness and impersonal or polite behaviour”, she says. And her outlook is positive. While foreigners clearly need to make more effort to get a job, she says: “the struggle usually pays off, because people learn useful skills along the way.”

Rights and prejudice

Laura's homeland is going through its own learning process, as it becomes a host country not only for migrants, but also for refugees. The total numbers are still small: in 2013, of the over 400,000 people seeking asylum in the EU as a whole, just 1495 landed into Romania (compared to almost 30,000 in the UK). Between 1991 and 2013, 3370 people - mainly from Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria - obtained refugee status in Romania. And services - and attitudes - are still catching up.

Sibali Regis Silvere, a 27 year-old who fled from the Central African Republic via Cameroon to Romania this year, was lucky to find a job in a call centre shortly after his request for asylum was granted. For many, that's not the case, often because employers or even official institutions are not aware of the law. (Refugee status grants a person all the same rights, including to work as a Romanian citizen - except the right to vote; asylum seekers gain the right to work once they've been in the process for one year.)

Sibali (27), a refugee from the Central African Republic, found work quickly in Bucharest, where he's now been living for five months. He tells us his story - and why the job isn't that important in the end - [in French] - <https://vimeo.com/112623512>

"We had a situation like this even at the city hall", says lead police inspector Carmen Cristea, director at the Regional Centre for Accommodation and Procedures for Asylum Seekers in Bucharest. "We needed a social house for a refugee with health problems and the councillors of the mayor were surprised to find out that these people have the same rights as Romanian citizens."

The perception is still, according to Razvan Samoila, director of the Bucharest-based NGO ARCA (Romanian Forum for Refugees and Migrants), that "these people came to take our places to work". Even the position of the National Agency for Employment in Romania (ANOFM) seems to be that their focus is on Romanians, says Razvan. "They tell us: 'we have a lot of Romanians that have no job, you are talking about a minority'"

ARCA, which tries to help refugees integrate, has seen occasional cases of positive discrimination. "A big hotel in Bucharest wanted to hire a refugee, because they said that they need a black person", says Razvan. "They came to us asking for this. This guy started opening the door of the hotel and now he is working as a receptionist and is the leader of the trade union inside the hotel - he represents Romanians in front of the employer." But, he adds, such cases remain the exception.

New wave, old barriers

In London, new demographics are also putting pressure on services, with a wave of secondary migration caused by jobseekers leaving behind countries, like Spain and Portugal, hit badly by the financial crisis. That's why Latin Americans in particular are one of the fastest growing communities in the UK, according to Lucia Vinzon, director at a London NGO, the IndoAmerican Refugee and Migrant Organization (IRMO). In 2011, there were an estimated

200,000 Latin Americans in the UK, and 120,000 in London alone; the figure is likely to be much higher today.

Run almost entirely by volunteers, IRMO gives social welfare, housing and employment advice to migrants. Lately, a lot of young people are dropping in, says Lucia. “They expect it to be easy, and most of our users do find a job very quickly when they arrive, but mostly cleaning,” she says - despite the fact that 70% of Latin Americans living in the UK have studied beyond secondary level. “Once you get engaged in this industry, it’s very difficult to get out,” she says. Cleaning jobs are often antisocial hours, making it difficult to socialise and integrate with longer-term residents, or to study and gain qualifications to move up the ladder. Worse still: “they have to work a lot since pay is very low.” Latin Americans in London are not alone in struggling to progress, it seems. A recent study by the International Labour Organization across six European countries finds that employment gaps between native and foreign-born workers not only persist, “but have widened since the onset of the global economic crisis” and that “few European governments are doing enough to help recent immigrants move from low-skilled precarious jobs and into decent work”.

Lucia, Director of the IndoAmerican Refugee Migrant Organization in London, talks about the secondary wave of Latin American migration and why young people can find it hard to do something other than cleaning jobs - <https://vimeo.com/109996879>

It’s also about a culture shift, says Lucia. Finding a well-paid job is almost impossible without relevant work experience, but one of the best ways of getting round that isn’t obvious to the people she works with. “In Latin America or Spain this culture of volunteering doesn’t exist... they have to understand that volunteering is not just to do something for someone else - it can improve your skills, your network...we put a lot of effort into trying to make them understand this, and also to connect them to other organisations.”

For many migrants, the barriers are more substantial. Christine at the Baytree Centre, who has been working with migrants for many years, says the women they meet often have “no confidence... also sometimes you find health problems they’ve brought with them... a lot of them suffer anxiety, depression, or trauma, if they’ve come from a war-torn country.”

Those with the advantage of education behind them can struggle to have their qualifications recognised. For refugees, it’s even more tricky.

In Romania, “ANOFM wants a diploma - but many refugees just fled from their countries and they have no diplomas”, says ARCA’s Razvan. Fleeing life-threatening situations makes contacting former colleges or universities too dangerous; many will avoid even contacting their family for fear of putting them in danger.

Slimmed-down services

The UK may have been welcoming migrants and refugees for decades longer than Romania and its neighbours. But, according to those on the frontline, the services to support them are

gravely under-resourced - while anti-immigration sentiment continues, all the more so in the lead-up to national elections in May 2015, and right-wing parties gain increasing support.

Refugees need specialist support to find work - apart from anything else, they might not have gone through the British education system. And support services for refugees have not recovered since 2011, when the Refugee Council - one of the main UK charities working directly with refugees - lost over 60% of its funding within three months' notice; the Refugee Integration & Employment Service it delivered on behalf of the UK government was closed down completely. That service was actually saving the government "a lot of money", according to Sheila Heard, the founder of Transitions, a London-based social enterprise that tries to fill the gap by helping refugees with professional qualifications access jobs. "We try to run a tiny service - something is better than nothing", she says.

Back in Bucharest, Claudia Bezdadea, integration officer at the General Inspectorate for Immigration, works closely with the National Agency for Employment (ANOFM) to help refugees and asylum seekers find work. She is based at the Regional Centre for Accommodation and Procedures for Asylum Seekers Bucharest, where around 100 refugees, mostly from Afghanistan and Syria, are living.

"Refugees should not refuse a job without reason - but also, ANOFM does not get involved so much, because there are not enough jobs, even for Romanians", Claudia explains. "They should organise courses, but in reality it is not happening, because you know very well that there is no money... We receive a little support from ANOFM, almost nothing."

But, she adds, it's not entirely the authorities who are at fault.

"Some of the refugees are not so interested in finding a job, they don't like the job, or they don't want to keep it. Most of them are interested only in receiving the money from the state, not in working," she says.

Not that the state handouts are significant. Refugees out of work receive 540 Romanian lei from the state - at almost €122 per month, that's less than the minimum wage, but still more than what asylum seekers have to survive on - a paltry 108 lei per month, or under €25.

Making it alone

In the end, practical considerations come first for many young people, even for the quietly ambitious.

Sibali knows that as a qualified accountant, he could do better than his current job in a call centre. But that's not his priority right now.

"I just want to look after my wife and one year old daughter," he says. "They are in Cameroon for the moment, I've started the family reunification process. I am happy in Romania because I live in peace, the job is something secondary."

Sope Oyewole, 28 years old, from Nigeria, came to Bucharest to study medicine - “because it’s cheaper”, but also because of the tensions in her country of origin that means universities are often closed. She is currently doing her residency in gastroenterology, and says she’s happy in Romania - but is already thinking of looking for work abroad, maybe in Ireland.

“As much as I love Romania, as a country and the people, it doesn’t make sense to stay”, she says. “It would be a loss for me - I don’t get paid so much and then I would have paid too much to study here and I don’t get back enough in return.”

Her younger brother Kiki studied engineering, but found a job as a barista in a high-end Bucharest coffee shop; he even plans to enter a nationwide contest for baristas this winter. Like his sister, he is also thinking ahead.

“My daughter will grow and I don’t think that my barista job will put bread on my table for my family”, he says.

“Right now I am doing ok, but I am thinking to get involved in this coffee business. I might try to go [to the UK], because I don’t want to struggle with the language.” Not to London, though, where everyone else goes. “There everything is settled... I want to be a pioneer!”

Kiki Oyewole, originally from Nigeria and living in Bucharest, Romania, talks about his unexpected career path and his ambitions for the future - <https://vimeo.com/109995414>

In London, DJ Mob Mobs is equally determined to make his mark.

“I feel like I’ve definitely got what it takes”, he says. “I’m under no illusions that I’m not the best and I’m not perfect, but what I know is that I’m very dedicated to my work, I do have talent. With dedication and talent you can only reach success at some point.”

For the young Somalis too, with patience, things should get easier.

“Our parents all came [to the UK] in their 30s”, says Faisa. “We’re finding our feet... so our kids will have more chances - it’s always the first people that have [the most difficulties].”