

FOR A FISTFUL OF OPPORTUNITIES

How Romanians and Spaniards seek them across Europe

From corner to corner, from east to west and from south to north, a youth migration fair is opening its gates for those who are used to the slamming door sound inside an ill European labour system. Young Europe is on the move searching for better living conditions, jobs and for the dreams which their parents used to enjoy. "Lost," "internship", "precarious", "family dependent", "poor" - are labels attached to the lapel of European youth. The figures are more than eloquent - 5.3 million people under 25 in the EU do not have a job; if you also count those between 25 and 30 years, the result is almost double. A university degree becomes a bookmark for babysitting job offers or a pillow for late nights spent in EU countries of adoption. A recent TNS survey published by the European Parliament a few days ago, shows that more than four in ten young Europeans (43%) said that they would like to work, study or undergo training in another EU country. Clearly, the young Romanian and Spaniards are not missing from this picture. Whether they get to paint people without heads, to clean the floor or to be called "Slaves" by kindergarten children, the young generation continues to draw maps which they follow far and wide.

Uprooting people without a head

Migration of Romanians abroad has become a phenomenon after the fall of communism. Nearly 100.000 persons left the country immediately after the revolution. As the Academics Society in Romania suggest in their 2014 annual report, that wave was marked by an ethnical component – the majority of legal immigrants were ethnic Germans and Hungarians. After 2002, Romanians could breathe the European fresh air. The visas were lifted up, they could get a well-paid job much easier than before and the Bucharest authorities had their reason for joy, because unemployment continued to artificially fall. Since then, the migration flow increased, with its periods of acceleration and braking.

In Dawn Holland's book - *Labour Mobility within the EU - The impact of Enlargement and Transitional Arrangements*, quoted by ASR in their report, we can find that Romania was the most affected country by labour mobility, with 7.3% of total population emigrating to the EU-15 between 2004 and 2009. In Romania over 23% of those aged under 25 years do not have a job, a percentage which increased in the last four years, from 16%. The figures can be much higher, taking into account that there are also those who have finished school, did not find work, but have not registered as unemployed. After work restrictions were lifted in the EU on 1st of January 2014, most of them have the chance to seek their opportunities abroad. "Romanians do not miss any chance to open their heart", said the great Romanian philosopher, Emil Cioran. Working abroad is a fertile ground for this behaviour.

Ovidiu Batistă, a 27-year-old Romanian young artist, was adopted by Spain more than 4 years ago. He presently resides in A Coruña where he works in several projects involving printmaking, engraving, painting and drawing. The decision of migrating represented, he says, the culmination point of his professional aim. Ever since, when he is speaking about his story, he puts a grin after each sentence pause. There is a surreal tone in his voice. He is happy and his artistic work follows the musical tunes of his laughter.

In Romania he travelled from Bârlad, his place of birth, to Iași and then to Timișoara, where he subscribed at the Faculty of Fine Arts. Back then, Ovidiu chased artistic projects where he could contribute and enhance. He was hungry for knowledge and hungry of exposing his work:

"My work was received very well. People were enthusiastic and curios. The problem was that you could not live only with this. Of course, we need people to come to these exhibitions. However they do not come to buy a piece of art. Because of the financial situation, or I don't know, their priority was not this. For the public art is not a necessary act of living."

Ovidiu's chance was an Erasmus scholarship at the School of Fine Arts of Metz (France). He felt that he should take his talent and passion for lithography to another level:

"French people are very tough. When they hear about Romanians... (Laughs). I have lived for about one year there. At first, people did not want to speak with me. Surely that was a particular case, not all of them are like that." he said. "A French girl who wanted to spend her Erasmus in Romania asked me – do you have drinking water? Do you have internet?"

The irony is that a French friend opened his eyes on what Spain has to offer. There, his teachers sharpened his style. In Romania, he says, they only focused on the technique of drawing:

"I think it is very good that in Romanian faculties you are very well prepared in terms of technique and drawing. The problem is that nobody told us then that you have to sell this work and you have to sell it as it represents you."

Although an absolute majority of young Europeans (55% versus 42%) consider that their country's education and training system is well adapted to the current world of work, the TNS survey ordered by the European Parliament shows that 62% of young Romanians and 74% of young Spaniards are among the ones who consider the opposite.

The European Commission admits that there are cases where the education system has not given young people the skills and qualifications that employers are looking for.

"It's another area where essentially we encourage Member States to invest and to learn from each other best practices." says Jonathan Todd, spokesman for László Andor, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

Investment and best practices in arts attracted Ovidiu. Two scholarships and an impressive workshop lured him in Spain. Back in his country he would not have these benefits. In only one month he met a lot of people and received invitations to exhibit in various places. Now, he feels like in the bosom of Francisco de Goya. He lives from selling his work and he is proud that he wasn't forced to *"pick strawberries"* not even for a minute. He is known like the artist that paints people without a head (Gente sin cabeza), one of his trademarks and also one of his themes of inspiration that found him when he left Romania.

"<<People without head>> are about losing self-control and identity, an uprooting. You are not the same. It's your body carried by the wind. I search for movement, dynamism. The bodies are full of life because of the colours and dynamics. Once you are taken away from your usual place, you feel bizarre. This (n.r. series of paintings) has to do something with what I felt in France."

Good luck and talent had shaken hands in Ovidiu's case. He planned his trip very carefully and he got all the benefits of it.

No money but no intention to come back home

Not the same thing we can say about Lucian Turcu, a 27-year-old restoration artist, with a Master degree, from Timisoara, who has chosen Barcelona as a city of adoption, searching for Gaudi's muses of inspiration.

"I arrived here in Barcelona to find a proper job. I did not want to struggle in the Romanian system. The firm where I had worked back there did not have projects anymore."

Painting and music easily make their way into his artistic life. However, without a plan, Lucian was left in the hands of goddess Fortuna. As he gathered his paintings in a portfolio, he also has enabled his second talent and began to do what many foreign artists do when they arrive in Barcelona – he sat in a space on the crowded Las Ramblas and there just inspiration made the difference:

"I also interpret street music. I do percussion. In Romania you do not have this freedom. When you do something, the policemen come and ask for your authorization in that place. Here also, when I sang on the street, the police came and I got fined because percussion is forbidden in Barcelona. But here, in general, there are much more possibilities."

Lucian's inflexion point was recorded when he ran out of money. His friend from Barcelona could not host him anymore, so he moved into a hostel. He was spending much more than he was earning. He got broke:

"In the morning I helped in the hostel with cleaning. After a week, they hired me as a receptionist. So I started earning money. I never thought off going back home."

Lucian has submitted his file portfolio to cultural centres in Barcelona. He is very optimistic. He managed to overcome that moment and now he conjugates his life between art and his girlfriend Sandra. Cultural differences weld their relationship. He brought her to Romania for a few days:

"For her, as a journalism student and a sensitive girl that she is, it was a pretty weird situation when she saw a little gipsy girl saying to her that in Romania nobody gets involved in her education, to send her to school. She was impressed and started crying. We had a discussion earlier that here in Spain people are used to having lots of things and when they do not have anymore, a lot of problems start inside their families. In my family, which is a modest one, we are much more used to these things and we cherish a lot our simple moments."

The scent of Romania

The 'Spanish anthropologist and migration scholar Miguel Pajares says that Romanian migrants, in general, prefer small groups to the detriment of large community meetings, but one of the points where they gather are the religious services from churches.

This can also be testified by father Aurel Bunda who began his pastoral-missionary activity more than 13 years ago with one main objective – to witness the construction of the largest Romanian church ever raised outside the country, in the heart of Barcelona – Sfântul Gheorghe Church. The construction of the worship is expected to finish by the end of this year.

"At the level of Catalan administration it was a big surprise the fact that a community is building a monument of culture and spirituality."

Meanwhile, he preaches in an improvised space near the church's shipyard. His first mass service, he remembers, gathered almost 400 Romanians from all across Catalunya.

He listened and offered advice to a lot of young Romanians who have requested.

"Almost 75% of young Romanians here do not have a job. This is their main problem. A lot of them work on temporary basis or in the black market. So I advise them to be very well prepared and documented regarding the chances they can exploit here – a job, a contract, a scholarship, a PhD. It is almost impossible to find a job par hazard like in the old times."

Another place where Romanians gather is the Transylvania restaurant, owned by Doru Rosu. The building's wall is a witness to stories of anxiety and despair.

Doru Rosu was a student when he first came to Spain, on vacation. He decided to stay. He was only 21 back then. He immediately saw the possibilities and a few years later, with his savings and with the help of his parents started a business in which he brought the traditional Romanian kitchen to the community established in Barcelona.

Doru opened up his restaurant in Barcelona to the image of one in Madrid. Perpetual competition for originality among both cities was not a handicap for him.

"Having good friends in Madrid, each time I was visiting, I saw a little Romanian bar, a restaurant. They would cook you a tripe soup... you know...homesickness. I was young, not married, for me it was very hard to cook. Usually I ate what I could, fried eggs, fried potatoes. In 2005 I thought to open a Romanian market, the first one in Barcelona. In times of the crisis, because Romanians moved much closer to the centre with their jobs, I saw an opportunity, I opened a little bar, I saw it was ok and in 2013 I started this restaurant."

Besides a hot meal, at the restaurant you can always find a partner for discussion and a short word by mouth work fair. Doru has identified a profile in this case: *"for Romanians it doesn't matter where they work, it is important that they have a job."*

EU countries of adoption – failed plan

Romanians remain the largest immigrant community in Spain, with 795,500 members, although their number decreased by 8.6%, amid the general decline of the Spanish population.

Miguel Pajares says that *"in Spain the foreign population is being diminished for the last 2 or 3 years. This is also the tendency for Romanians. They do not migrate as they did. Some of them are continuing to migrate, but taking into account that after this year's raised labour restrictions for Romanians and Bulgarians, some countries, like the UK, were afraid that they will fill up with Romanians, but in fact this thing never happened."*

Dragoş, a 25-year-old journalism graduate, elaborated two plans of leaving Romania which he had put into practice. In each of the cases he had come back. That's because his plan was a D plan – D from despair. In England and Spain he gave up the pen and the recorder for windshield washing solutions and tools to install windows.

"I had 3 different jobs in the mass media sector from Iasi. I could not cover food, and at the end when I managed to do this, no money were left for me. That's why I migrate in a foreign country – England."

This new world was not about deadlines and imprimaturs. Dragoş was the main character in his own feature story. People who he had interacted with, he says, could have easily been divided into two categories – the ones who worked and keep quiet and the noisy ones who wanted to take advantage of your lack of experience. Meanwhile, he was earning sums that he could not imagine back home. 1600 pounds per month, not even the medium wage in the UK, was magic for his pocket.

"The money I was receiving in England could not equal the amount I could receive in 5 years of work in the mass-media sector from Iasi and Vaslui. But at some point, one of my bosses who also took the advantage to come and work in a foreign country did not want me anymore. It was because I did not accept his barbeque invitations, his invitations to smoke. At some point, because of this, he wanted an additional tax if I were to remain – so that I could buy him a percentage of my salary to remain. I quit in that moment."

He also had to share a house with colleagues from Romania. This was not also a sparkling star for his journey. It was like a pot of "Divine Comedy". *"It was also a joke which applies to this situation, with de devils which guarded the boiler with Romanians and when somebody wanted to escape, the others kept him in the boiler. Like they are not willing to let you evolve."*

He came back. Not for long time, because the perspectives in Romania did not change. He packed his things and went to Spain. His plan wasn't the best so he ended up inserting windows throughout Madrid. People were looking at him through a glass of reluctance>

"They were much more closed. They were reluctant. They had the impression that you have come to take their jobs. For a Romanian there was no siesta, no lunch break, you have to work at least 10-12 hours. In England I had to work 12 hours and in Spain, depending on the work project, with some coffee and soda, I could stay 14-15 hours."

He left Spain after 5 months. Dragos is planning another trip. He is fed up of the European Union. *"The third time will be my lucky time. But I will want to travel 2000 km to Australia."*

Spanish au pair or incidental slave?

While many migrants are leaving Spain, particularly Romanians, some locals have also decided to try their luck abroad. It is interesting to note that both Romania and Spain used to be closed countries, they both used to put strict controls over who left or came to their territory.

By the time they opened up after facing economic collapse, globalisation came soon after. Today, both countries have joined the EU and are inevitably entangled. Visas, work permits and borders sound like the distant past. Like Romanians, Spanish are beginning to exercise a right to leave their country in search of a better future, one their ancestors fought for. And yet the struggle continues.

Spain, widely known to be a touristic destination all across the continent and the door to Europe by many, is used to welcoming people instead of waving goodbyes. But the economic crisis caused massive unemployment, which for ages ranging 18 and 25 is up to 57.7%. Like the country's economy, youngsters' expectations have recessed.

In the 18th Century philosopher Edmund Burke described Spain as a great whale stranded on the shores of Europe. But its youth is stranded no more. They eagerly seek job opportunities and many are looking up north, inland. Because in Spain, when trouble comes, people tend to come up with a fairly simple solution: to cross the Pyrenees.

After her final year in high school, Amira Ameziane, now 22, turned the hourglass to job advertisements but success was not happening in Spain. She had been in the UK in the past and knew of the need for the so-called au-pairs, young women acting as nannies for children while parents are off to work.

Amira travelled from Barcelona to London to pursue this line of work. At no point was she expected to leave aside her warm, Mediterranean ways, to fit in with the traditionally uptight London upper and middle class. In fact, British families tend to employ Mediterranean women, since their character traits, such as warmth and cosiness, are very suitable to take care of children.

When Amira landed her first job, though, she realized how appearances can deceive. There was more to it than simply looking after babies:

"You basically take care of the children while the parents are gone, but you're also supposed to do some housework. Many of my other au pair friends find themselves in the same situation: you end up being also the cleaning lady".

Many young Spaniards grew up themselves with foreign nannies or saw how Romanians or Latin Americans used to take care of their grandparents. They didn't think their future would lie there someday.

Commonly an unregulated and underpaid job, an au pair's tasks are often left to the will of the family. *"Some are crystal clear about what the job entails, some aren't",* says Amira.

Although she is comfortable in her current job, the third since landing in London, she has gone through some troublesome experiences, particularly with her first family:

"The children themselves would call me slave. And the parents didn't seem to care. I felt really bad for a while."

She ended up breaking what was supposed to be a one year agreement to seek another family.

Pack your Master diploma

Some in Spain cannot quite believe that some youngsters might find themselves in situations like Amira's. When first evidence of migration happening hit the headlines, it started a media frenzy of confusing articles about young professionals forced to leave provided that they could not find a job in the country. All sorts of frightening thoughts would cross people's minds. Was it really so many people that were leaving? What would happen to pensions and demography?

It is shocking for Spaniards because we have to go back to the sixties to find further examples of a trend in Spanish migration. Franco's dictatorship had opened up and Spaniards travelled north to contribute to the staggering growth taking place there. Everybody thought this kind of situations were over.

However, it's different this time. This new exiles are not uneducated, manual workers, like in the past. Today they carry sophisticated cases and flight tickets. As a common rule, first things to pack are Degrees, Masters and PhDs.

Janira Oller, now 28, is one of this expats fleeing from poor expectations. In Spain, she was fed up with unemployment and poorly paid jobs that didn't allow her to move away from their parent's house. When Janira met her actual boyfriend, they both agreed that they should go abroad to fulfil their expectations for a comfortable life. Janira dusted off her BA in Education and her MA in Institutional Relations and ended up finding a job in Bristol, a city in southern England. She is now a self-sustained preschool teacher:

"The English value your qualifications and your skills above your age or country of origin. Moreover, if you work hard you get a reward. In Spain if you don't sacrifice entirely for your company they brand you as a bad worker."

Janira's intuition about a problematic job market is on the right track. It has long been duly noted by the European Commission. When asked about the subject, the spokesman for László Andor, Commissioner on Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Jonathan Todd, puts it in a political language:

"We have seen in this countries [Spain and Italy] what we call a fragmented job market where we have a category of workers who enjoy very favourable terms of employment and other workers who don't have a job at all or tend to be employed on a series of short term contracts and have nothing like the same quality of terms of employment."

Feeling at a standstill is common among the Spanish youth. Many find it hard to accept that they might live in worse conditions than the ones their parents dealt with in their young age. Like a trapped hamster hopelessly spinning a wheel, youngsters are feverously bouncing from unpaid internship to low paid internship. There seldom is a carrot attached to the stick in the form of a long time contract. If Lucian Turcu's theory is correct and Spanish do like to possess lots of things, first step to take is to get a quality job.

Why could not Janira find a job? She certainly tried. After her degree, she worked for two years in a social centre helping families at risk of social exclusion. At the third, they didn't offer her a long term contract but fired her. Then, she decided to do a Master's degree. After this effort she only managed to get an unpaid traineeship with no promotion possibilities. At this stage, going abroad seemed like the best solution.

"It's a problem of whether the labour law is very favourable to long established employees but in practice discourages employers of taking new staff." adds Jonathan Todd. If we combine the effects of the economic crisis with a problematic job market, we begin to understand the key drivers for this Spanish newly born migration.

This national failure, though, has dire consequences on young people's expectations and takes their toll on their credibility for institutions. The Flash Eurobarometer "European Youth 2014" found that 84% of young Spaniards feel

excluded from social and economic life because of the crisis, compared to 57% of young Europeans as a whole. This macro data is very simply put into a sentence by Pepe, a 23-year-old Spaniard currently in an Erasmus exchange in Iași, Romania:

"Today in Spain, when we finish our studies, we don't see how to continue".

Pepe's colleague, Gabriel, agrees. Gabriel is currently doing an internship in a company based in Iași. He came to the city as in an exchange while studying law and business administration and when he had the opportunity to come back, he didn't think twice:

"If you see an interesting opportunity, don't close the door on you", says like some sort of slogan.

Pepe talks of a friend of his who works many hours for Spanish company for free:

"I don't call it exploitation because she is a hard worker and does it voluntarily. It's kind of sad that in such a short time the tables have turned. We used to do internships and earn enough to at least relieve our parent's finances".

Looking for data

Nevertheless, the extent of this mobility might not be as significant as the national media frenzy might suggest. While there is no scientific data that puts it into figures, Spanish anthropologist and migration scholar Miguel Pajares questions that that the young Spanish migrants represent a significant number:

"We don't know scientifically whether it's big or small because this data comes from a registry held at a local council level. We know that some of this data refers to Latin American people who were nationalised in Spain and also go back to their countries."

This local registry is not thorough enough to distinguish the Spaniards of Latin American descent that go back to their countries and the young Spaniards that migrate. The website asinosvamos.es provides some data about leaving migrants such as destination countries but they also raise awareness of this lack of data, such as some sort of poll that lets us know which professional categories tend to leave.

Therefore, the term brain drain, largely popularized by Spanish media, might not be that accurate if not so many people are leaving. Mr Todd also acknowledges this new migration flow from Southern states to northern states and also questions the extent of the phenomena:

"In Italy, Spain and Greece young people have tended not to move. It may be because of cultural factors, climatic factors.... It has not been a huge increase."

A siren's song

Migration is assessed differently with time, with a better historical perspective. Right now, it's difficult to say if these young migrants will come back to Spain or not. This odyssean idea of a comeback to the motherland is frequent among them. But now a fistful of good opportunities are the perfect siren's song.

"Above all, you cannot stay numb or unemployed", says Lluís Pablo, a 24-year-old who wants to go to London to squeeze dry his B.A. of Media Communications in London. Right now he is watching hours go by at the sports retail chain where he currently works. He aims for a scholarship that will allow him to work abroad with no cost for the company. This will win him ample experience that potential employers might value positively if he decides to come back

to Spain. *"The country is in a very delicate position and finding a job which is not precarious, where you can work your way up, is really complicated."* Again, the hamster trapped in the wheel.

The idea of a future come back might make it easier to tear up the families. In Lluís's case, friends and family have been very supportive: *"They see it has a good way to develop my professional skills."*

Pepe, the Spanish Erasmus student in Romania, considers it even before finishing his studies.

"Now is the time to go abroad and gain knowledge, as much as possible, so that when we come back, we can pour it out and, if possible, earn a living".

Along those lines, Jonathan Tood brings up the example of Polish migration in the UK. As the economy picks up in Poland, many migrants decide to go back and bring valuable experience and training to their home economy. Spain could also benefit from these migrants if they return.

Right now it remains unclear. Their answers tend to be vague, inconclusive. When asked about it, Janira Oller answers *"This country has given me what Spain couldn't give me. For now, I will stay here"*. Only time will tell.

Romanian and Spanish youngsters share the feeling that in their country the young generation has been marginalised and excluded from economic and social life by the crisis. Thus, mobility remains one of the best solutions.

Calculated plans with a mixture of an old-fashioned adventure are placed on various maps of hope. Language and cultural approach, besides proximity, explains a lot of their movements in the EU. Youth unemployment is the mirror image of unhappiness. Not even a job can put a smile on those faces. A young journalist can earn more money inserting windows in Spain than chasing subjects in Romania. You cannot see Spaniards migrating to Romania for work, but you can see them explore the Romanian culture as Erasmus students.

However when they get a job in another member state, homesickness is not a solid argument for the country of origin to count on, when it expects their youngsters to come back and help boost the local economy.

The majority of Romanian and Spanish youth consider that the education system in their country is not adapted to the world of work. If young people are not ready once they make their first steps in a career, that precious time is lost forever. This would have an impact on productivity. When they will be employed, they will range in level some time ago.

While people gladly approve and support mobility, they are choosing it, often, due to economic failures in national countries. Freedom of labour, when exercised forcibly, is plain old migration.