

“GARBAGEMEN ARE ALSO IMPORTANT”. HOW “LOW-SKILLED”  
ROMANIAN MIGRANTS VIEW POLITICAL REPRESENTATION  
AND THE “BRAIN DRAIN” DISCOURSE

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**ABSTRACT**

The “brain drain” phenomenon and narratives about the emigration of “skilled” labour, a tendency often summed up in phrases such as “our specialists are leaving us,” occupy a prominent place in public debates about migration from Romania. Although it is not the only dominant discourse on this topic, the “brain drain” phenomenon remains one of the most influential frames through which migration is discussed in public and media debates in Romania. This article analyses the experiences of Romanian migrants labelled as “low-skilled” in Amsterdam, whose migration trajectories and work experiences abroad do not receive the same level of public visibility as those of “skilled” migrants. Drawing on in-depth interviews, this article explores why they chose to emigrate, how they build their lives in the Netherlands, and what they think about a possible return to Romania. Many have described the frustration caused by labels that reduce their lives to a matter of “skills” or “qualifications.” Their stories reveal not only the economic pressures that push people to emigrate, but also the emotional and social challenges of building a new life abroad, while at the same time maintaining ties to their own roots. Through the thematic analysis of migrants’ narratives, this study highlights the diversity and resilience within the Romanian diaspora. The study challenges the limitations of the “brain drain” narrative and argues for a broader, more equitable understanding of migration, which recognises the value and agency of all migrants, regardless of their educational level or type of employment. In conclusion, this article stresses the urgent need for migrants categorized as “low-skilled” to be better represented in political and media debates, as well as in designing public policies, rather than being treated solely as a marginal or “sacrificial” category.

**Keywords:** Romanian migration, “brain drain”, “low-skilled” migrants, misrepresentation.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article will explore the life stories of “low-skilled” Romanian migrants in Amsterdam. It will analyse their motivations for migrating, opinions on returning to their home country, reactions to their political and media representation back home, and views on the current emigration discourse in Romania.

Public discourse on Romanian emigration has never been monolithic, but rather comprises multiple, historically contingent narratives that shift their emphasis between economic loss, national sacrifice, the diaspora as a resource, and related moral judgements, according to prevailing migration patterns, economic conditions, and political priorities. For instance, for a long time, seasonal and informal “low-skilled” migration dominated the Romanian public’s attention through figures such as *căpșunari* (seasonal agricultural workers) and *badante* (intern care workers for Italian elders). The public discourse has often framed these cases of “low-skilled” migration via the social consequences directly caused by their work abroad (seasonal or not), such as migrant mothers leaving their children behind in Romania (Hartman, 2008). This seasonal and informal type of labour mobility has been extensively documented in academic work, highlighting structural demand in destination countries for this type of labour as well as their typically temporary and precarious nature (Voivozeanu, 2020).

At the same time, official discourse, particularly from policymakers and other political representatives, has increasingly framed high-skill emigration from critical labour sectors, such as healthcare and education, as “brain drain”. This narrative positions the emigration of doctors, teachers and other “professionals” as a national human capital loss, serving to justify systemic failures and resource shortages in these fields (Botezat & Moraru, 2020). Similarly, academic analyses of broader “professional” emigration reinforce this framing of economic nationalism, i.e. portraying “skilled” emigration as a national loss (Bălan & Olteanu, 2017). After Romania’s EU accession, such discourses gained traction through media headlines decrying staff crises in “highly-skilled” fields (see Birchall, 2015 and Digi24, 2023).

While both discursive strands coexist within broader Romanian migration discussions, they produce distinct representational hierarchies: moral panic over “low-skilled” migration’s social consequences versus economic nationalism celebrating, and then lamenting the loss of the so-called “elites”. This article examines the “brain drain” discourse not as the definitive account of Romanian emigration, but as an analytically significant one, revealing how permanent “low-skilled” migration and settlement patterns, like those of Romanian “low-skilled” migrants in Amsterdam, remain obscured between seasonal worker stereotypes and “high-skill” narratives. For the purposes of this research, “low-skilled” migrants are defined as individuals working in occupations that do not require formal qualifications or tertiary education, such as hospitality, cleaning or delivery services, following the labour categorisations of their host country (Anderson, 2013).

The concept of “brain drain” describes the emigration of highly skilled professionals, and has long dominated scholarly and public discussions on Romanian emigration. However, this framing has been critiqued as ideological and overly simplistic, potentially obscuring the nuanced motivations and realities of migrants (Clemens, 2009). While extensive research has examined the causes and consequences of “skilled” migration, the persistent emphasis on this issue risks overshadowing the experiences of “low-skilled” Romanian migrants, whose perspectives have only recently received attention in academia and the broader public view, having been underexplored for decades. Notably, earlier research emphasised the aforementioned seasonal and informal “low-skilled” migration, limiting their analysis to southern Europe rather than other prominent migration destinations, such as the Netherlands.

Prior studies largely focused on the emigration of “professionals” and its impacts on critical sectors such as healthcare and education (Bălan & Olteanu, 2017). This disproportionate attention may lead to redundancies in the literature, masking important social and economic dynamics that shape the lives of migrants working in occupations deemed to be “lower-skilled” (Anghel & Horváth, 2015). Addressing this gap is pivotal for a comprehensive understanding of Romanian emigration patterns.

Labelling migrants as “high-skilled” or “low-skilled” requires caution. Government policies and media narratives often create these categories but tend to oversimplify the diverse range of backgrounds and experiences that migrants possess. The line between “skilled” and “unskilled” is not rigid, as it changes according to local immigration policies and the type of labour the host country needs at any given time. Often, what counts as a “skill” is shaped more by political and economic priorities than by the real abilities or contributions of migrants (Anderson, 2013). Because of this, these labels can reinforce stereotypes and ignore how certain “skills” might be undervalued or overlooked in different countries. Thus, being aware of this problematic distinction between emigrants is essential.

Understanding the experiences of “low-skilled” migrants is crucial for gaining a comprehensive picture of Romanian migration. Additionally, examining Romanian emigration through this lens would contribute to a more nuanced public debate on the issue and would help challenge the social stereotypes these migrants often face. Perhaps most importantly, examining migrants’ opinions and reactions can shed light on how the media or politicians may misrepresent them. This is why this paper will focus on the so-called Romanian “low-skilled” emigrants.

By foregrounding individual stories, the study highlights the complexities that are usually missing from more general accounts on migration, including migration motivations and the stereotypes Romanian migrants may encounter abroad. Relying on simplistic labels obscures this diversity. The focus lies on migrants’ reasons for leaving Romania, their return intentions, their perceptions of their political representation, and their views on the dominant “brain drain” discourse.

This paper begins by reviewing the existing literature on Romanian migration and the dominant “brain drain” narrative, then goes on to outline the methodological approach to qualitative interviews with “low-skilled” Romanian migrants in Amsterdam. Thereafter, I present the thematic findings from these interviews on the respondents’ migration motivations, their return intentions, and political representation, followed by a discussion of how these experiences challenge the prevailing public discourses.

### CONCEPTUAL AND LITERARY FRAMEWORK

Romania’s contemporary migration dynamics are deeply rooted in the profound social and political transformations that followed the 1989 Revolution. Under the Communist regime, emigration was severely restricted, limiting authorised departures primarily to exceptional cases controlled by the state, through its power institutions (Horváth, 2007; Leca *et al.*, 2015). However, with the fall of the regime and the subsequent liberalisation of migration policies, Romania experienced a significant surge in its outward mobility. This dramatic shift occurred amid a broader atmosphere of economic uncertainty, social upheaval, and institutional restructuring. Durkheim’s (1933) concept of *anomie*, for instance, which characterises a breakdown of social norms and the resulting feelings of disorientation and purposelessness, serves as a compelling lens through which one could understand the motivations for migration during this period of transition.

Economic instability was compounded by the dismantling of the welfare state, characterised by guaranteed employment, subsidised housing and food and free healthcare under communism. Another major contribution to the aforementioned instability was the adoption of neoliberal reforms, which intensified economic deprivation, thus creating the pressure for some Romanians to seek opportunities abroad (Stan, 2024). In this sense, the early post-communist migration boom reflected both a response to new economic hardships and the “release” of migration potential that had accumulated under decades of authoritarian rule. This resulted in migration being seen as a form of upward mobility; however, data shows that this was mainly caused by the economic precariousness of a nation in its post-authoritarian rebuilding stage (Anghel, 2016). Concurrently, Western European labour markets, facing shortages in certain sectors, attracted Romanian workers, including those employed in “low-skilled” occupations (Piore, 1979). This structural interplay of push and pull factors has shaped the complex migration landscape explored in this study, offering critical insight into the conditions influencing migrants’ decisions and trajectories.

Much of the existing research and political discourse on emigration has centred on the phenomenon of “brain drain”, with the Romanian media frequently promoting the narrative of a “brain-drain diaspora”, usually in an effort to justify key shortages in important labour sectors, such as healthcare or engineering. This framing is deeply embedded in mainstream Romanian public discourse, with early

examples including *'The Impact of the “Brain Drain” Phenomenon Is Felt Most Acutely in Healthcare'* (Birchall, 2015, Adevărul) and *'The Invisible Money That Quietly Leave the Country: The Financial Losses Caused by the Brain Drain'* (Popa, 2022, Hotnews.ro). More recently, this narrative has shown no signs of fading from headlines, with examples such as *'Romania Is Facing One of the Worst Brain Drains in the World: In the Last 10–15 Years, 20% of the Workforce Has Emigrated'* (Digi24, 2023) to *'57% of Young Doctors Say They Prefer to Emigrate: Why Are We Also Losing So Much Mid-Level Healthcare Staff?'* (Popa, 2024, Hotnews.ro) and *'Daniel David Warns That “We Are Starting to Run Out of Teachers” in Schools: What Solutions Does He Propose?'* (Ghiurca, 2025, Adevărul). What is striking is not merely the persistence of this framing, but its consistency, as the focus remains fixed on “skilled” emigrants across a decade of coverage, most recently echoed in articles such as *'The Brain Drain Phenomenon Is Growing in Romania: We Are Losing Young Graduates Due to the Lack of Jobs'* (Ghiță, 2026, Știrile ProTV), leaving the broader migration picture largely unexamined.

This discourse predominantly focuses on those labelled as “skilled” emigrants in key sectors such as healthcare and education, and while the concerns it raises are justified given the significant impact of talent loss on critical public services, it ultimately offers a reductive and incomplete portrayal of Romanian migration. Even Romanian migration specialists have begun pushing back against this narrative in the public media, with sociologist Remus Anghel cautioning that the idea that those leaving are “the best” is not necessarily valid, noting that the majority of emigrants in fact work in agriculture, transport, and other labour-intensive sectors (Cornea, 2023). This persistent and narrow framing, as this paper argues, sidelines the experiences of Romanian migrants who are not considered “skilled”.

The concept of “brain drain” generally refers to the emigration of “highly-skilled” individuals and is often described as a ‘transaction of human capital’ (Goga & Ilie, 2017, p. 3). It manifests primarily through the geographical movement of workers from less developed to more developed countries (Flanja & Nistor, 2017), following common migration patterns related to job seeking and career advancement on international markets (Pescaru, 2014). For instance, Flanja and Nistor’s (2017) study found that the intent of Romanian graduates to seek employment abroad is closely tied to their perception of limited professional and personal development opportunities at home.

However, critics such as Clemens (2009) argue that the notion of “brain drain” carries an ideological bias, framing “skilled” emigration in a negative light and diverting attention from addressing the underlying causes of migration decisions (Clemens, 2009, p. 1).

The issue of “brain drain” has long been discussed and researched, dominating public debates while leaving the experiences of the so-called “low-skilled” migrants comparatively underexplored. In the Romanian context in particular, the term

“brain drain” proves too analytically narrow, as it captures only a fraction of actual emigration patterns, obscuring the broader reality of migration trajectories that this study seeks to illuminate.

The term itself has created a dichotomy in migration studies, often framing the issue as a flawed comparison between “high-skilled” and “low-skilled” migrants. This dichotomy can be better understood through Max Weber’s concept of life chances, which refers to the opportunities individuals have to improve their quality of life. These opportunities are largely shaped not by individual effort alone but by social structures such as class, status, and access to resources (Weber, 1922, as cited in Dahrendorf, 1979, p. 49). From an economic perspective, the argument follows that individuals with higher qualifications generally have better prospects for employment and income stability (Müller, 2020).

Consequently, different motivations emerge between these groups: “high-skilled” migrants tend to leave because they anticipate greater life chances abroad, while “low-skilled” migrants often depart due to constrained opportunities at home, as they view even those modest prospects abroad as improving their own and their families’ lives. This framework highlights why the dominant “brain drain” narrative overlooks the broader reality of Romanian migration, where many migrants seek to advance from significantly disadvantaged starting points.

Building on this, Hein de Haas’ *aspirations-capabilities framework* (2021) further explains the gap between the “brain drain” discourse and actual migration experiences. This theory posits that migration decisions are influenced by individuals’ aspirations, namely their goals and perceived opportunities, and their capabilities, namely the freedoms and resources enabling or limiting movement (de Haas, 2021). Both “high-skilled” and “low-skilled” migrants may aspire to migrate, but their actual ability to do so depends on complex economic, social, and institutional factors. Specifically, the capabilities of “low-skilled” migrants are often limited by factors such as restricted access to education. Despite these constraints, their aspirations may persist or intensify due to perceived deprivation in their home country (de Haas, 2021).

The theory also recognises how labour demand in destination countries channels “low-skilled” migrants into particular sectors, shaping their migration experiences. Overall, the aspirations-capabilities framework underscores that migration is not driven solely by the pursuit of “high-level” skills but by a dynamic interplay between individual goals and structural opportunity constraints, influencing both “high-skilled” and “low-skilled” Romanian migrants alike.

Romanian “low-skilled” migrants face representational challenges within public discourse shaped by multiple stereotypes, such as being framed as seasonal or informal labourers, and exclusionary discussions, such as the “brain drain” narrative. Rather than creating a simple dichotomy, these coexisting Romanian migration discourses have historically emphasised certain forms of migration over others, often reflecting perceived social or economic impacts rather than objective migration

patterns (Sandu, 2005). This study examines how such framings influence migrants' own perceptions of their trajectories, particularly those involving permanent settlement rather than temporary labour.

Consequently, the experiences and needs of “low-skilled” migrants are rendered nearly invisible within both past and present public debates and media coverage. This invisibility reinforces stereotypes and fails to address the deeper social and economic inequalities shaping migration patterns. The lack of representation perpetuates a one-sided understanding of Romanian migration, excluding the structural constraints and aspirations of the majority of migrants, mainly those with fewer resources and formal qualifications, from the mainstream discourse.

As Stan (2024) notes, labourers without formal qualifications form the primary source of emigration from Romania, typically hailing from rural or small-town areas. These “low-skilled” migrants often take jobs in sectors such as domestic services, industry, and construction, where they are generally positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy in destination countries.

Cristian *et al.* (2017) further observe that individuals with secondary education choose destinations based on factors such as rapid job availability in “low-skilled” fields, such as agriculture and construction, in contrast with those with higher education who emphasise language, social networks, and earning security.

This study addresses the uneven representation of migrants by focusing on the experiences of “low-skilled” Romanian migrants in Amsterdam. It aims to explore whether these migrants feel misrepresented by media and political discourses, how they perceive their migration experience, their engagement with political discourse on Romanian emigration, and their views regarding the possibility of return. The overshadowing “brain drain” narrative risks generating policies and public perceptions that neglect the specific vulnerabilities and realities of this large migrant segment, potentially exacerbating their challenges. Thus, this research asks: *How do “low-skilled” Romanian migrants in Amsterdam engage with the political discourse on emigration in Romania?*

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs semi-structured interviews with eight Romanian “low-skilled” migrants, working in different domains, such as hospitality, cleaning and delivery services in Amsterdam and the nearby suburbs. Respondents were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling between April and May of 2025. Data was collected in Romanian via audio-recorded interviews, transcribed and analysed thematically using the Atlas.ti software.

The Romanian diaspora in the Netherlands comprised approximately 52,000 Romanian nationals in 2024, compared to 10,000 in 2014 (Statistics Netherlands, 2024). The rise partly reflects educational opportunities attracting Romanian youth (Sandu, 2024). However, it is likely that within these numbers, there is a significant

subset of “low-skilled” migrant workers, particularly in densely populated urban areas.

Keeping in mind Anderson’s (2013) argument regarding the arbitrary labelling of “high-skill” and “low-skill” by political and economic entities, I define “low-skilled” migrants as individuals whose formal qualifications or current employment status do not align with the host country’s definitions of “skilled” labour, and who predominantly work in sectors that usually require no formal certification, such as hospitality, cleaning services, or delivery services. I must underscore that the “low-skill” label is only used to help with categorisation; it does not in any way reflect these individuals’ abilities or potential, but rather the way their abilities are recognised or overlooked within current policy frameworks.

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents who met the study criteria: “low-skilled” Romanian migrants residing or working in Amsterdam or nearby suburbs, aged 18 or older. This method helped collect nuanced data aligned with the research objectives. Snowball sampling was also used as a secondary method, applied where specific respondents could only become accessible through referrals from mutual acquaintances or individuals who took an interest in this research and agreed to refer me to them.

Recruitment employed a combination of approaches, utilising existing social and educational networks, engagement with Romanian online communities, and in-person inquiries at workplaces and public establishments to ensure a diverse participant pool.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with eight respondents. The interviews were all conducted in the Romanian language, in person, and took place between April 1, 2025, and May 22, 2025, at various locations, depending on the respondents’ convenience. The quotes presented in the analysis below were manually translated, maintaining a *verbatim* approach as much as possible. The data resulting from the semi-structured interview approach proved to be quite rich, capturing the complexity of each participant’s lived reality.

The interviews followed the following sequence: First, an introductory discussion establishing consent and comfort; Second, participants were asked some basic demographic questions about aspects such as age, origin, occupation, level of education, and so on. After this short introductory and demographic discussion, the interview consisted of three thematic blocks of primarily open-ended questions: The first block focused on their emigration experience, inquiring about their migration motives (e.g. “Why did you leave Romania?”), challenges they faced abroad (e.g. “What are the biggest difficulties you faced after moving to Amsterdam?”) and their adaptation to life in the Netherlands (e.g. “How does your life here compare to your previous life in Romania?”). The second block focused on their return intentions (e.g. “Are you thinking about returning to Romania?”) and any challenges they perceive they would face if they returned (e.g. “Is there anything that worries you about the prospect of returning to Romania?”). The third and final

block focused on their opinions and reactions to the political discourse of emigration in Romania, inquiring about their engagement with Romanian news and politics (e.g. “How often do you follow Romanian news?”), their perceptions on political representation (e.g. “Do Romanian politicians understand the experiences of migrants like yourself?”), their opinion on how the Romanian media portrays migrants (e.g. “Do you think Romanian media accurately portrays the lives of emigrants like yourself?”), and their responses to the dominant “brain drain” narrative (e.g. “Should the brain drain narrative shift to focus on all diaspora members, not just select groups?”). The interviews consisted of 30–35 questions, averaging 50 minutes per respondent.

Drawing again on Anderson’s (2013) argument, the use of semi-structured interviews was also informed by the need to challenge conventional generalisations and experiences hidden behind specific labels, such as “low-skilled migrant”. All interviews were audio-recorded with the respondents’ consent, and later transcribed to facilitate analysis. The transcripts were coded using the Atlas.ti software, with initial codes grouped into categories and later refined into specific themes. The interviews were then examined using a mix of thematic and discourse analysis.

The main question this article seeks to answer is: How do “low-skilled” Romanian migrants in Amsterdam engage with the political discourse on emigration in Romania? This overarching question is operationalised through four specific sub-questions that systematically structure the empirical analysis and interview design.

The first sub-question (**RQ1**) is: *What characterises the migration experience of “low-skilled” migrants?* The migration experience will be explored by analysing respondents’ lived realities, challenges and adaptations, including motivations for leaving, integration and quality of life. These aspects will be examined through questions about economic and social factors influencing migration, difficulties encountered, and comparisons between life in Romania and the Netherlands.

The second sub-question (**RQ2**) is: *What are respondents’ return intentions and associated concerns?* Aspirations for a potential return will be analysed by investigating respondents’ intentions regarding moving back to Romania, how much they stay up-to-date with life in Romania, and concerns about a potential return. These aspects will be investigated through targeted questions on their current attitudes towards returning, anticipated obstacles, and how often they stay in touch with family and friends back home.

The third sub-question (**RQ3**) is: *How do respondents perceive their representation in Romanian political and media discourse?* Respondents’ opinions on the political discourse will be assessed by examining their views on the current discourse on emigration back home and how they view their and the diaspora’s representation in the media and political discourse. These aspects will be analysed using questions focused on the perception of politicians’ and media’s understanding of migrants’ experiences, the perceived adequacy of diaspora representation in the Romanian

parliament, and their suggestions for a better political and media engagement with the “low-skilled” diaspora.

The final sub-question (**RQ4**) is: *How do respondents react to the dominant “brain drain” narrative?* Respondents’ reactions to the dominant political and media discourse will be explored by analysing their agreement with dominant narratives, specifically regarding “brain drain”, and examining their specific opinions on the media and political discourse, including an exploration of potential feelings of exclusion and misrepresentation. This final category will be analysed through questions that ask how they feel about the more dominant focus on “high-skilled” migrants and what their opinions are on shifting the discourse's lens to encompass the entire diaspora.

Regarding ethical considerations, written consent was obtained from each respondent before their participation. Their names will be anonymised in this article to protect their information. All eight respondents were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their data would not be used further if they decided to do so. They were also informed how their data would be collected and used. As discussing migration reasons and political opinions can be sensitive, I approached the interviews proactively and cautiously, avoiding leading questions or value-laden judgements, and made it clear that respondents could skip any questions they did not want to answer or take a break whenever necessary. Respondents’ autonomy, dignity and privacy were always respected throughout the research process.

Finally, I must also mention my positionality as a researcher of Romanian origin. While sharing a cultural and linguistic background with the respondents offered significant advantages, I also recognised the risk of introducing personal biases and assumptions during the data collection and analysis. This is why I made a conscious effort to question my initial assumptions about what might motivate “low-skilled” migration or how migrants perceive political discourse, remaining open to unexpected themes and divergent experiences. I intentionally sought out respondents with a wide range of migration experiences to avoid over-representing narratives that might align too closely with my own. I remained vigilant against projecting my experiences onto those of my respondents, ensuring their voices remained central to the interpretation of the data.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

Some important demographic information must be mentioned before beginning the analysis. Six of the respondents work in the hospitality industry, another respondent works as a cleaner, and the other works as a shift leader for a delivery company. Four of the respondents had completed higher education programmes in Romania, but have stated that they do not wish to pursue a career based on their

specialisation, at least until later in life. There is an even split between men and women, with their age ranges spanning from the early 20s to the late 40s. Their demographics are presented in the figure below.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Time in NL (approximately)</b>
Elena	Female	Hostess	High School	7 years
Andreea	Female	Shift Leader	University	1 year and 6 months
Mihai	Male	Cleaner	High School	3 weeks*
Florin	Male	Bartender	High School	6 years and 6 months*
Laura	Female	Bartender	University	6 years and 6 months*
Bogdan	Male	Cook	University	8 years*
Sorin	Male	Waiter	Vocational School	5 years
Anca	Female	Cook	University	2 years

Figure 1. Respondent demographics.

#### RQ1: MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

While respondents described a range of migration motivations, the majority cited economic considerations as the primary factor driving their decision to emigrate. Most of them highlighted Romania’s economic precarity, which may take various forms, including limited opportunities on the labour market, low wages, and unstable employment. One respondent summarised this feeling:

“[...] avem salarii foarte mici. Nu te poți descurca [...] cu un salariu de 1 500–1 600 de lei pe lună. Mi se pare foarte puțin. Și dacă vrei să dezvolti cariera ta personală, nu ai cum.”

“[...] our salaries are very small. You cannot get by [...] with a salary of 1,500–1,600 RON a month. I think it’s very little. And if you want to develop your personal career, you simply can’t.”

(Sorin, waiter)

While this general feeling regarding economic precarity back home was common, individual circumstances varied. Some left Romania simply because they were dissatisfied with the low wages back home, others left to raise money or were driven by curiosity and a desire to explore. One of the interviewees recounts:

“Mi-am zis că nu pot să ajung în momentul în care să vând o proprietate ca să avem ce mânca, să-mi ajut fetița [...] Și am zis, hai să încerc să merg într-o altă țară”

“I told myself I don’t want to get to the point of selling off properties to put food on the table for my little girl [...] And I said, let me try to go to another country.”

(Elena, hostess)

Regarding the challenges they faced upon arriving in the Netherlands, several issues were mentioned, including the bureaucratic aspects of moving or the ongoing housing crisis in the Netherlands, which multiple participants have emphasised during interviews. The general social atmosphere they encountered was also mentioned, with some respondents describing the Dutch as cold and unwelcoming at times.

A recurring theme in several accounts was the experience of stigma against Romanians in the Netherlands, often articulated through negative stereotypes portraying them as dishonest, corrupt, or prone to criminal behaviour. It was described as:

“[...]anumite persoane, care vin și spun, ‘păi, dacă ești din România...’, sau, ‘las că știu eu cum sunteți voi românii’[...].”

“[...] some people coming and saying ‘Well, if you’re from Romania...’ or ‘I know how you Romanians are’[...].”

(Elena, hostess)

“Toată lumea ne consideră pleava societății sau că suntem nimeni. Asta poți să vezi în ochii oamenilor, cum îți vorbesc. Îți vorbesc frumos, te respectă, până în momentul în care îți întreabă de unde ești și le spui România.”

“Everyone considers us the scum of society or nobodies. You can see this in people’s eyes, in how they talk to you. They speak nicely to you, they respect you until the moment they ask where you’re from and you say Romania.”

(Sorin, waiter)

“M-au sunat ca să mă duc la interviu și mai întâi la telefon m-au întrebat de unde sunt și reacția a fost ‘aaa’. Și după aia de acolo s-a încheiat, nu am mai ajuns la interviu.”

“I was invited to go to an interview on a phone call, and they first asked where I’m from on the call, and their reaction was ‘ohhh’. And that was it, I never got to the interview.”

(Anca, cook)

It is worth noting that respondents also highlighted some positive aspects of their migration experience. The majority stated that they were never forced to learn Dutch, as the labour market was very accessible for non-Dutch speakers.

Moreover, most of them described the job-hunting process as quick and hassle-free, and some even stated that they had an easy transition to life in Amsterdam.

When it comes to comparing Romania and the Netherlands, most admitted that they receive much higher wages than they did back home. Some, however, were reserved and argued that, when higher expenses are also factored in, the living situation here becomes more or less the same as back home. About half of them also described a newfound sense of freedom in the Netherlands. A respondent described Romanians as judgmental and nosy, and recounted:

“În primele luni când eram în Olanda și mi-am dat seama cum sunt oamenii și cât de calmi pot să fie unul cu altul, eu mergeam în tramvai la muncă și începeam să plâng în tramvai [...] gândindu-mă că oamenii mei nu m-au tratat așa frumos cum tratează oamenii ăștia [olandezii].”

“In my first months in the Netherlands, when I realised how people are around here and how calm they can be with one another, I was taking the tram to work and starting crying on the tram [...] thinking that my people never treated me as nicely as these people [the Dutch] did.”

(Bogdan, cook)

#### RQ2: RETURN INTENTIONS

Opinions were split when it came to the prospect of returning to Romania. Some were determined to return to Romania at some point in the future, stating that they missed their home country or expressing optimism that life back home was slowly improving. Others were more reserved, admitting that they were thinking about returning, and mentioning that they also missed certain aspects of life in Romania, such as the more welcoming people or the cultural context. Some stated they did not wish to return, at least in the near future, but the majority who fell in this category either admitted that they still wanted to be involved in the country’s future from abroad, or had thought about returning.

The conflicting feelings of these different accounts were best characterised through this quote:

“Cam toți ar vrea să se întoarcă. [...] În primul pas o să spună nu, o să încerce să pună o barieră în față ca să nu îți arate ție că e slab, sentimental. Însă dacă stai să vorbești [...] să îi înțelegi, bariera aia o să dispară și o să înțelegi că la un moment dat o să vrea să se întoarcă acasă.”

“Almost all of them want to return. [...] At first, they’ll say no, they’ll try to put up a barrier so they don’t seem weak or sentimental to you. But if you take the time to talk [...] to understand them, that barrier will disappear, and you’ll realise that at some point, they’ll want to come home.”

(Sorin, waiter)

The majority of respondents admitted they keep up with life in Romania. However, most said that they do not travel back home too often, either because of workplace constraints, a lack of funds, or because they prefer to vacation somewhere new rather than in Romania.

Regarding concerns about a potential return, most respondents cited economic challenges, specifically their financial status or the market opportunities available upon returning to work in Romania. Some also mentioned that the treatment of workers is quite bad in Romania:

“În România se pune presiune pe angajat pentru viteză, pentru calitate, pentru orice. [...] Aici [...] e mai uman cumva. Acasă ești robot, ești plătit, ești sclav, într-un fel.”

“In Romania, pressure is put on the worker for speed, for quality, for everything. [...] Here [...] it’s more humane somehow. In Romania, you’re a robot, a slave, in a way.”

(Mihai, cleaner)

A respondent raised a particularly intriguing point regarding their readjustment to life in Romania:

“[Mă îngrijorează] Că nu o să mă readaptez din punct de vedere social. [...] Dar am, nu știu, bula de la locul de muncă, bula orașului în sine. Am descoperit și am creat conexiuni cu oameni la care n-aș fi visat niciodată. Și mi-e greu să cred că am la fel de multe șanse să cunosc persoanele astea acasă în București.”

“[I am worried] That I will not socially re-adapt. [...] I have, I don’t know, my workplace bubble, the bubble of the city itself. I’ve discovered and created connections with people that I never dreamed of. And I find it hard to believe that I have the same chances of meeting these people in Bucharest.”

(Florin, bartender)

### RQ3: POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

For many, frustrations with political representation stem from long-standing, deeper systemic issues in Romania. Respondents described a landscape marked by infrastructural problems, such as a lack of roads or inefficient public transport systems, the aforementioned bad treatment of workers in the labour market, and concerns regarding widespread nepotism and corruption. Multiple respondents expressed concern about the declining school system in Romania, arguing that it is outdated, that some active teachers are less knowledgeable about the subjects they teach than some of their students, or that they are concerned about the high rate of functional illiteracy among Romanians.

One interviewee gave her thoughts about what is causing the school system’s problems:

“E o combinație de elevi care nu mai vor școală, profesori care sunt plătiți prost și sunt cu facultăți terminate [...]. Și clasa politică care vede bube în altă parte, dar nu de fapt de unde începe totul.”

“It’s a mix of students who’ve lost interest in school and teachers who are underpaid despite having university degrees [...]. And the political class that focuses on issues elsewhere, rather than where the root of it all lies.”

(Laura, bartender)

The most common suggestions for systemic change provided by respondents were that Romanian employers should treat their workers better and that several anti-corruption and anti-nepotism measures should be implemented across multiple sectors, including the labour market.

Some also talked about issues within Romanian society itself. They mentioned aspects such as the fact that Romanians have a sense of superiority, are judgmental and label people, with some interviewees explicitly stating that they dislike this attitude. The most common argument among the respondents, however, was that Romanians are stuck in their ways, meaning they lack an open mind and are unwilling to change. This attitude was described as follows:

“[...] în mare parte oamenii încă sunt așa, văd într-o singură direcție, nu s-au actualizat, upgradat ca sa zic așa, cu timpurile.”

“[...] a big part of people are still like that, they only see in one direction, they haven’t updated, upgraded, with current times.”

(Elena, hostess)

“E greu să le spun românilor ‘Poartă-te frumos’. Sau ‘nu mai fi nesimțit’. Sau treburi de genul ăsta. [...] Și mă consumă când merg pe stradă, adică în România [...] și oamenii sunt la fel.”

“It’s hard to tell Romanians ‘Act nicely’. Or ‘stop being rude’. Or stuff like that. [...] And it consumes me when I walk down the street, that is, in Romania [...] and people are always the same.”

(Bogdan, cook)

Together, these systemic and social challenges contribute to a pervasive sense of frustration and alienation among respondents, shaping both their migration decisions and their perceptions of representation. Since the representation of “low-skilled” migrants is a primary aspect of this study, I will focus primarily on respondents’ views and experiences related to it, narrowing the broader issues presented above to this central theme.

The majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the way Romanian mass media present the lives of “low-skilled” migrants. The articles and news stories on the topic of migration were described as bland, inaccurate, and frustrating to watch:

“[...] Reporterii români care vor să ne pună la pământ, doar să facă oamenii cu studii superioare să se simtă un pic mai bine că n-au studiat degeaba.”

“[...] Romanian reporters that want to put us down, only to make those with higher education feel a bit better that they have not studied for nothing.”

(Sorin, waiter)

Some interviewees also saw most mainstream Romanian news as perpetuating false information or particular propaganda. They described stories from major news outlets as easily falsifiable, political propaganda, or as presenting what influential people want “us” to see and hear, as shown by this response:

“Nu mai vreau să văd pentru că înainte mă afecta [...]. Dar, din experiența mea de viață, știu foarte bine că ceea ce vedem și auzim e ceea ce trebuie să ne dea cineva [...].”

“I don’t want to see any more because it affected me before [...]. But, from my life experience, I know very well that what we see and hear must be fed to us by someone [...].”

(Elena, hostess)

Their most common suggestion for changing the way Romanian media presents Romanian migrants, especially “low-skilled” migrants, was that journalistic articles and investigations on the topic of migration should be used to show more real experiences and life stories of migrants.

There was an overwhelming amount of reported issues and dissatisfaction with the way respondents perceived their representation by Romanian politicians. A resounding majority of interviewees said that Romanian politicians do not adequately and accurately represent their voices. This was then broken down into different arguments for why respondents perceived this situation as extremely dissatisfactory.

Most arguments were, however, centred around a specific, majoritarian view: That Romanian politicians do not care about migrants, especially “low-skilled” migrants. This general argument was presented differently by each respondent, with supporting arguments such as the notion that politicians only care about the electoral power of the diaspora, that politicians are extremely corrupt, or that they discuss the issue of migration solely for political gain, without considering ways to resolve it.

Some also admitted that they are certain that politicians are aware of the reasons they, and others like them, left the country, as exemplified by this respondent:

“Da, [ei știu], dar din punctul meu de vedere... Nu știu cât de mult se gândesc cu adevărat la asta.”

“Yes, [they know] but from my point of view... I don’t know how much they really think about it.”

(Andreea, shift leader)

Almost all respondents argued that politicians do not understand “low-skilled” migrants’ experiences and challenges. They argued that politicians are not present enough among the Romanian people, and that they will never truly understand the experiences of migrants unless they endure them themselves. One interviewee exemplified this argument:

“Cum nici eu nu o să înțeleg experiențele minorităților care se confruntă cu rasismul. Deși am idee ce înseamnă rasism și am idee prin ce trec ei, nu am experiențele lor directe.”

“It’s like how I will never understand the experiences of minorities that face racism. Although I have an idea of what racism means and of what they’re going through, I do not have their direct experiences.”

(Florin, bartender)

Their suggestions for how politicians should improve have mainly focused on improving life in Romania, facilitating the return of more migrants, creating more opportunities for returning migrants, or actually investigating the reasons why so many Romanians are leaving the country.

Out of all respondents, only one considered himself to be adequately represented by the number of diaspora parliamentarians in the Romanian parliament. When asked about suggested changes regarding the number of diaspora parliamentarians, most argued either that there needs to be more representatives for the Romanian diaspora or that the current representatives should be better qualified. Another suggestion was to lay off any member of parliament who does not actively contribute to policymaking.

The majority of respondents argued that the diaspora has a powerful electoral impact, citing examples of past presidential elections where the diaspora heavily influenced the outcome.

To further explore how participants position themselves within prevailing political and migration discourses, they were presented with two statements reflecting familiar narratives about emigration, national identity, and the impact of migration on Romania. Their reactions offer insight into how migrants interpret and engage with common speculations and myths regarding the effects of Romanian migration.

The first statement presented to them came from sociologist Marin Burcea: “If emigration continues, Romania will not have a future in the next 15 years.” (Redacția GR, January 2023, translated from Romanian). Six respondents agreed with this, arguing that the poor conditions, such as low wages, at home create an impetus for people to leave in increasing numbers, thus harming the country in the long run. Two participants disagreed with the statement, arguing either that Romanians will always strive to return home or that the labour market gaps created by emigrants will be filled by foreign immigrants coming to Romania.

The second statement presented to them came from a front-running candidate in the cancelled 2024 presidential elections, Elena Lasconi: “I am loyal, I am not a traitor, and I love this country, because the easiest thing to do is to buy a ticket and go somewhere else.” (Mihăescu, September 2024, translated from Romanian). There was an overwhelming adverse reaction to this statement, with almost all respondents challenging the notion of being inadvertently labelled traitors for choosing to leave the country. All of them argued that leaving Romania is mainly caused by the need to go, not because one wants to emigrate, and that there is nothing simple about choosing to relocate from one's home country and leaving one's whole life behind to seek a better future.

An interviewee vehemently argued against migrants being inadvertently labelled as traitors:

“Văd că suntem numiți trădători că am plecat din țară. Dar, de fapt, trădători sunt ei [politicienii], pentru că nu au avut curajul să confrunte problema de ce oamenii pleacă din România. Să asculte gura poporului.”

“I see that we are called traitors because we left the country. But, actually, they [politicians] are the traitors, because they didn't dare to confront why people are leaving Romania. To listen to the people.”

(Sorin, waiter)

The most common suggestion for change regarding Romanian politicians was that they should focus on improving the overall quality of life in Romania. One respondent discussed the quality-of-life improvements this refocusing would bring:

“Dacă s-ar întâmpla lucrul ăsta, atunci înseamnă că le-ar păsa și de noi ăștia care am plecat și ne chinăm aici și stăm despărțiți de familie și ne-am întoarce în România [...]”

“If this were to happen, that would mean that they also care about those of us who left and struggle abroad and are separated from our families and would return to Romania [...]”

(Elena, hostess)

Others argued that politicians should experience life as migrants in order to represent the diaspora competently, while some insisted that Romanian migrants must be treated fairly through agencies that secure basic living and working conditions abroad, or simply through an approach that refuses to distinguish between “low-skilled” and “high-skilled” migrants. Taken together, these statements point to a broader expectation that representation requires not only formal political inclusion, but also embodied familiarity with migrant life and its social hierarchies. In this sense, the distinction between perceived “skills” opens onto the next section on the incomplete “brain drain” narrative.

#### RQ4: “GARBAGEMEN ARE ALSO IMPORTANT”

The majority of respondents had never encountered the term “brain drain” before. This suggests that migration is not usually discussed through a single, stable “brain drain” narrative, but rather through a changing set of frames that alternately emphasize economic loss, social sacrifice, institutional failure, or the moral worth of particular migrant groups. Their not having heard of this term is not a major surprise as, while the “brain drain” topic occupies a prominent analytical space in policy and academic circles, its technical framing rarely penetrates mainstream journalistic coverage, which tends to focus on specific labour market sectors (e.g., healthcare shortages) rather than adopting the term explicitly in headlines or articles. Nevertheless, a brief definition and examples were provided to all of the participants, including those who had already heard of it. Notably, the examples given were long-standing narratives from Romanian media outlets and politicians, such as those presented above, concerning the dwindling numbers of doctors and professors. These examples were selected because they represent some of the most visible and persistent “brain drain” narratives in Romanian public discourse, appearing consistently across major media outlets and political statements over time.

When asked if they believed the “brain drain” discourse represented them, almost all respondents, even those who had completed their higher education back home, argued that it did not. Some also argued that the focus on “brain drain” resembles a longing for those who have a certain social status, as exemplified by this respondent:

“[...] asta cu “brain drain” îi ca și cum îi plângem pe cei care aveau un statut (mai mare).”

“[...] this thing with “brain drain”, it’s like we are crying over those who had a (higher) status.”

(Andreea, shift leader)

The primary sentiment expressed by the majority of respondents was that the “brain drain” discourse does not provide a comprehensive picture of Romanian migration. General supporting arguments for this majoritarian feeling were that this discourse separates the experiences of migrants into two distinct categories, “high-skilled” and “low-skilled”, with migrants organised into the “high-skilled” category gaining considerably more importance and attention than those deemed part of the “low-skilled” category. It should also be noted that a small number of participants believed that the so-called “brains” should be more visible in the public eye than the other migrants.

The distinction between the two categories of migrants made by those fuelling the “brain drain” discourse was best characterised by this quote:

“De exemplu, dacă ai doi copii, unu-i avocat și unu-i vai de el, îl iei numa pe ăsta avocat și-l ridici și-l ceri și-l vrei, și pe ălalalt îl uiți? Nu. E tot copilul tău. [...] De altfel cum și eu sunt copilul țării.”

“For example, if you have two children, one is a lawyer and the other is not so well off, will you only take the lawyer and praise him and want him, and forget about the other one? No. It is still your child. [...] Just like how I am my country’s child.”

(Mihai, cleaner)

At this point, I am going to introduce the “garbagemen are also important” argument. This phrase emerged from participants’ responses when asked whether the “brain drain” discourse should include all members of the diaspora, regardless of their educational background. Several respondents illustrated their point by providing a specific example, that without garbage collectors, society would quickly fall apart, thus emphasising that every migrant, regardless of their “skill” level, plays a vital role in both their host and home countries.

Respondents argued that some professions, which seemingly require less “skill” than others, can be a lot more important. Examples of garbage collectors (as mentioned above) and construction workers were given, the argument here being that the work they do is just as relevant as other jobs that are usually given more importance. The majority of participants also emphasised that the “low-skill” part of the diaspora, while deemed less intelligent than others, are actually quite clever and should not be treated like lesser people simply because they do not hold a higher education diploma.

Respondents also argued that the so-called “low-skilled” migrants should be given more respect, their lives and experiences should be understood by people fuelling the “brain drain” discourse, and that everybody’s voice matters, regardless of their educational achievements.

When asked how “low-skilled” migrants should be represented in the public discourse, a respondent had this to say:

“Într-o lumină corectă. [...] În a le recunoaște valoarea mai mult decât o fac. [...] Vocea tuturor ar trebui să fie reprezentată în discursul ăsta, altfel nu avem o democrație.”

“In an accurate light. [...] In recognising their value more than they are currently doing. [...] Everybody’s voice should be represented in this discourse, otherwise we do not have a democracy.”

(Florin, bartender)

When asked if the “brain drain” discourse should be expanded to also include so-called “low-skilled” migrants, another respondent argued that:

“Bineînțeles. [...] Și chiar dacă nu au aceleași studii, aceeași mentalitate, aceeași putere de a face o schimbare în România, sunt la fel de importanți ca ceilalți. Sunt oameni. Și ar trebui recunoscuți și luați în considerare și ei.”

“Of course. [...] And even if they don’t have the same studies, the same mentality, the same power to make a change in Romania, they are just as important as the others. They’re people. And they should also be recognised and taken into account as such.”

(Laura, bartender)

Overall, the overwhelming majority of respondents argued that the “brain drain” discourse is incomplete without the experiences and lives of “low-skilled” migrants, and that they should be given the respect they deserve by being recognised as equally important as those deemed “highly-skilled”.

#### DATA INTERPRETATION

This section interprets the empirical data through the lens of the four research sub-questions, thus linking the findings of this research to the theoretical framework established in the literature review above. Given the results of this research, as presented in the data analysis section above, each sub-question reveals distinct dimensions of how “low-skilled” Romanian migrants experience migration and engage with dominant emigration discourses. This highlights both a theoretical alignment and some empirical challenges to existing migration narratives and dynamics.

##### RQ1: MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

The data demonstrates that “low-skilled” migrants often view modest employment abroad as a substantial improvement over their limited life chances in Romania. This corresponds with Weber’s concept of life chances, which asserts that social structures significantly constrain individual opportunities (Weber, 1922, as cited in Dahrendorf, 1979, p. 49). Due to systemic barriers such as low wages

and limited social safety nets at home, migration, even into “low-skill” positions, is perceived as an escape from precarity rather than a pursuit of elite success. This contrasts with “high-skilled” migrants who tend to optimise favourable life chances abroad, highlighting why the “brain drain” narrative oversimplifies and often misrepresents Romanian migration.

Concerning the aspirations-capabilities framework outlined by de Haas (2021), the results closely align with this theoretical perspective. All respondents aspired to a better life; however, limited opportunities, low wages, and other constraints in Romania influenced their decision to migrate. While economic hardship was a recurring theme, interviewees also cited broader motivations, such as dissatisfaction with social life or frustration with political leadership, demonstrating that migration is driven by a complex interplay of factors. Furthermore, the numerous suggestions from respondents for improving political and media representation reflect a desire to reshape perceptions, challenge stereotypes, and influence policy in Romania. Ultimately, these findings reinforce de Haas’s (2021) call for more nuanced migration policies: the experiences of my respondents show that policies based solely on attributed “skill level” or economic contribution fail to address the genuine aspirations of individuals and constraints that shape migration decisions.

#### RQ2: RETURN INTENTIONS

The findings reveal predominantly ambivalent return intentions, with respondents expressing emotional ties to Romania alongside practical economic and social barriers to repatriation. While most maintain active connections with family, friends as well as political and social developments back home, workplace constraints and limited travel frequency underscore ongoing transnational lives rather than definitive settlement decisions. These mixed orientations align with de Haas’ (2021) aspirations-capabilities framework, where persistent homeland attachment coexists with structural barriers, such as low domestic wages, poor worker treatment and social reintegration concerns. These perceived challenges diminish the feasibility to return for some participants, despite their underlying aspirations. Economic pragmatism seems to temper nostalgia, thus positioning migration as potentially reversible, but constrained by Romania’s unchanged/slow-changing structural conditions.

#### RQ3: POLITICAL & MEDIA REPRESENTATION

The results reveal the misrepresented experience faced by Romanian “low-skilled” migrants. Participants critique Romanian societal and political systems, express distrust in parliament, and overwhelmingly call for migration discourse to shift from emphasising “brain drain” and “high-skilled” migrants to encompassing the whole diaspora. Although some respondents first encountered the term “brain drain” during the interview process, their subsequent critiques reflect genuine

frustration with the underlying logic of skill hierarchies in public discourse, where high-skilled emigration receives disproportionate attention. This mediated exposure mirrors how such framings typically reach migrants indirectly through policy debates rather than personal familiarity. The participants articulate a collective identity that resists simplistic skill-based labels and propose ways to improve their representation in migration debates.

The impact of this misrepresentation is not merely symbolic. Respondents described how being overlooked or stereotyped in public discourse affects their self-esteem, sense of belonging, and even their willingness to engage with Romanian society and politics. Some reported feeling like “second-class citizens” both at home and abroad, while others noted that the lack of recognition for their work abroad, be it in cleaning, construction, or caregiving, contributes to a sense of alienation and frustration. As one respondent suggested, the current discourse “mourns” only those with higher social status, highlighting the emotional impact of exclusionary narratives.

#### RQ4: BRAIN DRAIN NARRATIVES

These findings strongly resonate with Anderson’s (2013) argument that dividing migrants into dichotomous categories based on perceived “skills” is an arbitrary and exclusionary practice. Migrants themselves experience this distinction as artificial, and their calls for a unified identity as Romanian emigrants echo the critique of segmentation based on one’s “skills”. The data shows that these labels not only reinforce social hierarchies among migrants but also open the door to damaging stereotypes, evident in respondents’ accounts of being treated as less valuable than others by Romanian media and politicians.

Overall, the interviewees’ perspectives challenge the dominant narrative identified by Anderson (2013), which privileges one segment of the diaspora while marginalising the other. Notably, many migrants actively resist this divide, emphasising the essential nature of their work, such as the often-cited example, “garbagemen are also important”, and in doing so, reclaim dignity and value for themselves and their peers.

Echoing Clemens’ (2009) critique, respondents felt that the term “brain drain” was narrow and misleading, saying it overshadows the motivations, aspirations and contributions of the larger part of the diaspora. The subject of Romanian migration is dominated by narratives concerning “high-skilled” migrants, with headlines referring to the loss of doctors or professors being predominantly discussed. The majority of respondents have noted that this discourse, perpetuated by Romanian media and politicians, casts aside the so-called “low-skilled” migrants’ experiences.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

This article examined how “low-skilled” Romanian migrants in Amsterdam engage with the political discourse at home on the topic of emigration. The focus on so-called “low-skilled” migrants, those without higher education or working in jobs generally considered less important, stems from concern that they are misrepresented in public debates on Romanian migration.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS & FINDINGS

Economic precarity in Romania, manifesting through low wages, unstable employment and limited opportunities, emerged as the dominant migration driver. Despite experiencing stigma and housing challenges in Amsterdam, respondents consistently reported improved living standards, higher earnings and greater personal freedoms compared to Romania.

Return intentions proved ambivalent, with emotional attachments to Romania tempered by persistent economic barriers, by poor domestic working conditions and by constant concerns regarding a potential social reintegration. While most maintain active connections to their homeland, structural constraints render repatriation unfeasible, for the moment, for most respondents.

Respondents consistently felt deeply misrepresented by Romanian media and politicians, who prioritise “high-skilled” narratives while ignoring “low-skilled” lived realities. This exclusion fosters alienation, with migrants perceiving themselves as politically invisible, despite the substantial electoral influence of the broader diaspora.

The “brain drain” narrative was nearly universally flagged as unrepresentative, and participants assert equal diaspora value through the “Garbagemen are also important” metaphor. They demand recognition beyond skill dichotomies, thus challenging the elite-focused migration discourse.

These findings reveal the existence of a systematic marginalisation within dominant Romanian migration narratives. Participants of this study actively contest their exclusion, demanding collective diaspora recognition that would transcend their perceived skill levels and would embrace all migrant experiences equally.

In short, as public discourse on Romanian emigration has historically oscillated between seasonal low-skilled narratives and more recent “brain drain” framings of “high-skilled” migration (particularly prominent since EU accession), this selective visibility continues to marginalise the experiences of permanently settled “low-skilled” migrants, such as those documented here. Respondents consistently felt misrepresented by Romanian media and politicians, arguing that their experiences matter equally and that their voices deserve inclusion alongside those of all diaspora members. The Romanian diaspora should be

recognised as a collective identity within migration discourse, representation, and policymaking, rather than fragmented into “skill”-based categories.

Taken together, all these theoretical perspectives highlight the central message of this study: We must move beyond simplistic categories, such as those based on perceived “skills”, when it comes to migration, and we must appreciate the full, diverse spectrum of experiences, as well as the migration patterns, waves and cycles, of the Romanian diaspora.

Future research should broaden the scope of this study by including larger and more diverse samples of Romanian migrants across different countries and occupational backgrounds, and by employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Comparative and longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into how experiences, identities, and representations evolve, helping to inform more effective and inclusive policies for the diaspora.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The divisive, discriminatory and exclusionary nature of current media and political discourse also carries significant policy implications. When the primary migration discourse prioritises retaining or attracting Romanian “high-skill” migrants, policies tend to target a limited occupational domain, such as salary increases for doctors, IT sector tax exemptions, and returnee business grants, leaving the broader diaspora’s needs unaddressed.

As also mentioned by the respondents, there is a significant need for this discourse to expand in order to include all members and voices of the diaspora, regardless of their educational background or occupation. Ultimately, I believe there are two clear examples of changes that should be implemented to foster a more inclusive policymaking for all migrants.

Firstly, ensuring that all Romanian migrants, regardless of their background and perceived “skills”, have formal representation and a voice in the Romanian parliament. This is crucial in countering the current misrepresentation of “low-skilled” migrants and can be achieved through various means. One example would be adjusting the criteria for diaspora parliamentary seats or consultative bodies to ensure that candidates and representatives are drawn from a broader range of backgrounds, rather than just professional or elite groups, or the organisation of forums or consultations where migrants from all occupational backgrounds can voice their concerns and policy suggestions directly to policymakers.

Secondly, state-sponsored support programmes tailored for migrants should be developed. These programmes should focus on issues such as improved access to employment services and targeted social and legal assistance to address challenges faced in both host countries and upon return to Romania. Such initiatives already exist for “high-skilled” returnees, exemplified by salary increases for doctors, IT sector tax exemptions, and the Start-Up Nation programme offering non-reimbursable grants up to €440 million in total funding (Ernst, 2025; Milcev, 2024). However,

these policies remain largely unavailable to “low-skilled” diaspora members. Taking these, or similar, actions for all diaspora segments would represent a step towards a more representative and equitable migration policy. The qualitative approach highlighted the diversity within “low-skilled” migrants, whose various regions of origin, ages, and backgrounds correspond to a wide array of abilities and aspirations overlooked by such reductive labels. Intersectional factors, such as regional accents, gender, or prior occupations, influence individual experiences and potential discrimination, challenging any monolithic understanding of “low-skilled” migration.

### LIMITATIONS

Several important limitations must be acknowledged in interpreting the findings of this research. Most significantly, the small sample size of eight participants, while appropriate for in-depth qualitative exploration, precludes statistical generalizability and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across the broader Romanian diaspora. Although thematic saturation was achieved even within this small sample, as proven by the recurrence of such themes as precarity, representation and opinions on the “brain drain” discourse, an expansion to a larger sample size would have boosted the generalizability of the findings.

Furthermore, the geographical focus on “low-skilled” migrants, specifically in Amsterdam and its surrounding suburbs, means that the findings may not accurately reflect the experiences of those migrants working and living in other European locations, labour market sectors, or with other migration trajectories. As this research relies exclusively on qualitative interviews, its results are also inherently shaped by the subjective perspectives of the participants and may not capture the full spectrum of “low-skilled” migrants’ opinions, particularly from more isolated or reluctant diaspora members.

In addition, my background as a Romanian researcher with a personal connection to the topic at hand may have influenced both the interview process and the interpretation of data, despite reflexive efforts to bracket preconceptions.

Finally, the specific socio-political context during data collection (April–May 2025) amid ongoing economic challenges and electoral cycles in Romania may have influenced the interpretation of these findings in light of evolving migration dynamics.

### FINAL MESSAGE & CALL TO ACTION

In the end, the key takeaway of this article is that Romanian “low-skilled” migrants mostly have a negative attitude towards Romanian media and politicians, and have a strong sense that no one cares about their individual stories. This leads to the deep feeling of disillusionment and abandonment that many “low-skilled”

migrants have, and they therefore perceive not only a lack of recognition by, but also a fundamental disconnect from their homeland.

This sentiment underscores the urgent need for Romanian institutions and media to acknowledge the realities faced by all migrants, not merely those framed through episodic discourses like seasonal and informal workers or the post-EU accession “brain drain” narratives focused on doctors and teachers (e.g., Popa, 2024, Hotnews.ro; Birchall, 2015, Adevărul; Ghiurca, 2025, Adevărul), thus ensuring their voices are heard and their experiences are respected in public discourse and policymaking. The “brain drain” framing persists due to its utility in justifying sector-specific policy failures (e.g. healthcare or education shortages) while obscuring broader structural emigration drivers affecting “low-skilled” permanent settlement patterns. Ultimately, fostering inclusive conversations that recognise the full diaspora spectrum is essential for rebuilding trust and valuing every Romanian migrant equally, transcending “skill”-based hierarchies.

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