



Civic engagement of immigrants in different associations in Romania

Case study: Romania

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I. Introduction

The full and equal participation of all members of society in the political decision-making process is crucial for the legitimacy of the democratic political systems in Europe's increasingly diverse societies. With around 34.0 million foreigners living in the EU-27, of which approximately 20.7 million are third country nationals¹, the European Union and its Member States face an increasing challenge in ensuring their effective representation. Third country nationals often do not enjoy basic political liberties and tend to be underrepresented and marginalized in decision-making processes and institutions.

One comprehensive way to achieve the integration of immigrants into civic life is through supporting their involvement into various organisations, such as migrant or ethnic associations. An immigrant organisation is an organisation run essentially by immigrants, focusing on advocacy work and / or providing social or cultural services to the immigrant community and sometimes to the host community as well. These groups can provide a voice for those who lack voting rights. Additionally, in supplying networks and knowledge of the political environment, they can help alleviate obstacles to taking part in political activities. These organizations can play an important

¹ Figures for 1 January 2012 according to:

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics



role not only in increasing immigrant political participation but in encouraging integration into the host society.

The present study aims to address the issue of civic engagement of immigrants in Romania focusing particularly on the involvement of immigrants in organizations.

II. Legal background

The Constitution of Romania includes in its stipulations the fundamental rights of the person, irrespective of the citizen quality or the form of stay. Thus, third country nationals with legal stay have access to the same rights as the Romanian citizens, with the exception of political rights or other rights specific only for the citizens of Romania. As a result immigrants can be actively involved in society by volunteering, being active in civil society and as members of unions or through their own networks and organisations.

The National Strategy on Immigration for 2011 – 2014 is the key policy paper on immigration and it aims to transpose the major integration policies established at the European level². One of the guidelines set up towards achieving the social integration of foreigners is to improve the involvement of immigrant communities in civil society through consultation mechanisms between different stakeholders.

The assistance provided for third country nationals through government-led integration is supported by complementary European financial instruments, most notably the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals (EIF). One of its objectives is “to increase civic, cultural and political participation of third country nationals in the host society in order to promote their active citizenship and recognition of fundamental values.”

² *The Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the European Union, The European Agenda for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals and the Integration Modules*



III. Findings

Official statistics indicate that there were 98.586 aliens registered in Romania in 2014 out of which 57.471 were third-country nationals³. As was the case in previous years the main countries of origin of third country nationals in Romania were The Republic of Moldova, Turkey, China, Syria and the United States of America. In fact over the last 4 years the average number of third country nationals in Romania was around 58.000 while the countries of origin mentioned above were consistently in the top 5. Most of them came to Romania for commercial activities or attending faculties, somewhat continuing a tradition existing since the communist regime. The vast majority of immigrants are concentrated in the capital Bucharest while the rest are located in other major cities like Constanța, Cluj-Napoca, Iași and Timișoara.

In Romania there are approximately sixty registered immigrant associations⁴. Most of them are either purely ethnic organisations or with a strong cultural/religious and sometimes professional scope. Their activities usually range from providing support for newcomers in their relation with the authorities and promoting the interests of immigrant entrepreneurs and students; actions aimed at promoting the culture of a certain country/region; Romanian language courses for immigrants; legal support for immigrants; information campaigns on antidiscrimination; and humanitarian aid (distribution of aid – food, clothes, footwear and books etc.).

Migrant NGOs in Romania are poorly organised compared to other Romanian civic organisations. They are usually small in terms of staff and organizational capacity and their public profile often lacks visibility and transparency. Continuity and sustainability are also big problems since funding is mostly provided through external donations or members' contributions and most of their activities are based on voluntary work.

³ By comparison in 2013 there were 98.975 aliens registered out of which 58.497 TCN's: <http://ori.mai.gov.ro/comunicate/citeste/ro/936/Evaluarea-activitii-Inspectoratului-General-pentru-Imigri>

⁴ As shown in the Migrant.ro database: <http://www.migrant.ro/results.php?offset=400&expr=&localitate=&tip=&domeniu=&grup=>



A significant number of immigrants actively involved in the integration of TCN's have started as part of informal support networks set up inside migrant communities in order to facilitate communication between newcomers and immigration authorities by providing information, orientation and interpretation. Moreover, most of the representatives of immigrant organisations interviewed for this research have revealed that they have collaborated or have been employed⁵ by Romanian NGOs on integration projects as community workers⁵ or intercultural mediators⁶. It is important to point out that some activities of immigrant associations' do not target exclusively newcomers and immigration issues.

Preserving and promoting cultural and religious practices⁶ seem to be of paramount importance for some immigrant NGOs and this is reflected also in their activities: language courses and cultural workshops etc. Although in the beginning of their work these associations had a very strong cultural or religious dimension, their range has later diversified to include providing support for immigrants as their central aim.

Knowing the problems faced by third country nationals, these associations try with their own means to draw the attention of public opinion and relevant institutions of the State towards the necessity of solving the problems. A lot of them are collaborating with Romanian NGOs working on integration as well as with state authorities⁷. The responsible Romanian authority on immigration, The General Inspectorate for Immigration (GII) has direct contact with some of these organisations as part of their informing and consultation sessions and in one notable case it has a

⁵ Four of the Romanian NGO's that are implementing EU funded projects on integration (Romanian National Council for Refugees, ARCA, Institutul Intercultural Timisoara and Jesuit Refugee Service) have regularly used community workers (leaders of migrant communities) in order to better inform the beneficiaries on the assistance provided;

⁶ There is a network of approximately 30 intercultural mediators and is available and active according to Institutul Intercultural Timisoara: <http://www.migrant.ro/mediatori>

⁶ Immigrant associations like Fundatia Duna, Fundatia Taiba organise Arab language courses for Romanian citizens and have members with a religious rank;

⁷ Associations like the Turkish Cultural Center, Fundatia Taiba, Casa Shalom have often collaborated with The General Inspectorate for Immigration on integration issues;



collaboration protocol with one such association⁸. Despite some exceptions, the exposure and influence of immigrant associations remains relatively low and their activities insufficiently transparent. Very few of them have functional websites and information available on current or past projects, funding and organizational structure. Interviewed representatives of these associations have indicated that working in an NGO represents more of a complementary activity to their primary profession and that funds are received either from abroad or through donations from community members and business associates. Also they feel that these types of associations aren't encouraged or supported enough by state authorities.

IV. Good practices

Most of the immigrant NGOs interviewed for this study stated that they are aware of the European Fund for the Integration of Third-country Nationals (EIF), but it had not come to their mind to apply for the funds to finance the implementation of their projects. It is difficult to find examples of projects implemented by immigrants NGOs aimed at improving the political participation of TCNs.

First of all, most of the immigrant organizations are cultural organizations which represent different ethnicities or nationalities living in Romania. Usually their activities are connected with the preservation and presentation of culture and traditions, without having an explicit political or policy agenda. Secondly, strict rules and constraints regarding managerial and financial experience, writing project proposals and organizational capacity, have discouraged some of them from applying for such funding.

That being said we have identified a case where an immigrant NGO has implemented EU funded projects in partnership with other Romanian NGOs. Organizatia Femeilor Refugiate in Romania

⁸ GII has a collaboration protocol with the Association of Turkish Businessmen aimed at disseminating legal information regarding acquiring permit of stay and work authorizations for potential Turkish immigrants ;



(Organisation of Refugee Women in Romania), a small immigrant NGO, has managed to be part of multicultural⁹ and integration projects while also being supported occasionally by UNHCR representation in Romania. The most relevant of these projects for the topic at hand is the “Migrant in Romania” project, implemented in 2009-2010 in partnership with the Romanian NGO Institutul Intercultural Timisoara and financed by the EIF fund. The objectives of this project were to develop consultation mechanisms for TCNs in four major cities in Romania and an online portal that would facilitate access to information for all relevant stakeholders.

Currently Organizatia Femeilor Refugiate in Romania is inactive and no information regarding its present endeavours could be retrieved. Unfortunately, this seems to be the only immigrant focused NGO implementing an EU funded project designed to improve political participation and integration for TCNs. There have been other attempts by immigrant NGOs at applying for EU funds in partnership with Romanian NGOs, but so far they remained unsuccessful¹⁰.

Other examples of good practices include a case where a Romanian NGO supported foreign students at medical school to form their own association, and the mobilization of the Syrian community in Romania towards supporting their fellow Syrian refugees by their own means and resources¹¹.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

⁹ The project Fii cetatean global, financed through the Youth in Action program: www.fiicetateanglobal.wordpress.com

¹⁰ Bud's flowers an Iraqi NGO has submitted the project “Activities for facilitating the integration of TCN's with legal stay in Romania” in partnership with the Romanian NGO Lado Cluj as part of the 2011 EIF call for proposals but it was not selected for financing.

¹¹ According to Barometrul Integrării Imigranților, Asociația Română pentru Promovarea Sănătății & Soros Foundation, 2014



Although civil society actors from immigrant communities in Romania are still slowly emerging and finding their voice, some immigrant organisations and networks are in place providing a framework for civic involvement of TCNs. Going forward they need to better specialize and access funds in order to extend and diversify their activities. Many immigrants lack opportunities for employment and lack income security, which can make it more difficult to participate in more intensive political activities. Also, a lack of language proficiency can hinder their participation and understanding of the political system in Romania .

Most of the immigrant NGOs researched and interviewed have not implemented projects supported by the EIF, however, their work with third country nationals has given them insight into the existing opportunities and obstacles for their political participation, this situation can work to the advantage of both immigrants and host society.

By participating in social institutions and projects, immigrants take an active part in society and build bridges to the host society and its members. Facilitating immigrant participation and valuing their contribution fosters inclusion and mobilises their skills. A good deal of interaction between immigrants and non-immigrants takes place in mainstream organisations and their openness can encourage immigrants to actively take part in the life of these organisations and, thus, in society. Immigrant willingness and motivation to play an active role in organisations, and organisations' commitment to inclusiveness, serve to reinforce each other.

If immigrants are the target group of activities geared towards integration, they must be involved in planning those activities. The resources of immigrant associations include considerable knowledge of their communities, and thus they can offer more information on specific problems to the relevant authorities. Without strong immigrant organisations acting as dialogue partners for government and mobilising immigrants for political participation, ways of participation such as consultative bodies become formal and often meaningless.



Recommendations

- Responsible authorities should identify and contact the main TCNs communities in Romania and provide information on civic engagement and funding opportunities for immigrant organisations;
- Include Migrant Associations in all forms of dialogue with the state (advisory bodies on the national and/or local level);
- Trainings on civic engagement and diversity management should be available for TCNs through state programs;
- Romanian NGOs should encourage immigrant communities to form associations and be more open to partnering with them in projects;

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