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The Geopolitics of Work Migrants: The Romanian Diaspora, Legal Rights and Symbolic Geographies

Since the fall of communism, bilateral state relations in Eastern and Central Europe have been defined by a 'mopping up' process, in which policies aimed at diasporic communities in neighbouring countries were intended to set historical anomalies right. The Hungarian Status Law or Germany's efforts to 'reclaim' its 'ethnic Germans' are more evident examples, but similar – although maybe less coherent – efforts to maintain and reproduce identity within cross border diasporic groups are a common denominator.

Romania's governmental Department for the Relations with Romanians Living Abroad was initially set up with the similar mission to reconnect and support Romanians outside the state's immediate borders, the so-called historical minorities. More recently, though, Romania has had to confront a new phenomenon: migrant workers establishing diasporic groups in Western Europe. As this is another type of diaspora – albeit differently constituted, exhibiting different patterns and claiming new needs – new policies are needed, yet like many other Eastern European countries, Romania has done little in the way of responding to this wave of 'new' migration.

Many Eastern European countries currently 'loose' important portions of their populations to Western Europe (in Romania unofficial sources put the numbers of Romanians working in Europe at around two million, approximately ten per cent of the entire population). These

diasporic groups still maintain a strong link with their home and continue to contribute culturally and financially; however, subsequent Romanian governments have been slow to provide to such groups the aide necessary to maintain identity and prevent assimilation or to help protect their work and human rights. With few exceptions, there is also little in place to aid the return and reintegration of migrant workers, despite fears of 'brain drain' and 'population depletion.'

With European identity progressively characterised by work migration and the cultural exchanges resulting from it – and in the context of Romania's 2007 accession to the European Union – bilateral relations between newer and older European Union members, particularly Eastern and Western ones, are increasingly defined by the existence and role of work diasporas.

This article investigates current governmental support available for Romanian work migrants and also the existing legal provisions in some Western European countries. Such a comparative investigation sheds light on the inadequacy of current systems and the need for a European-wide structure that addresses a phenomenon that will characterize Europe's social make-up for some time. The article argues that bilateral state relations suffer as a result of either negative reactions to the presence of migrant workers in host countries or the inability of home countries to negotiate 'safe passage'. As a result, it is often up to diasporic groups to find a space where identity can be articulated, reproduced and expressed politically in order to address the lack of basic rights and the presence of discrimination. New media in the form of diasporic websites is offered as an example of the tactics Romanian migrant workers in Great Britain use to construct a 'language of claims' in their production and consumption of media.

Home government support for work migrants

Although increasingly work migrants are subsumed in the general and eclectic term of 'diaspora,'[1] one of the first challenges posed by work migrants is the difficulty of defining and labelling these groups.

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[1] For a comprehensive overview of diasporic traits see Tsagarousianou, Roza: Rethinking the concept of diaspora: mobility, connectivity and communication in a globalised world. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, Vol. 1, Nr. 1, 2004. 52–65.

They have been called transnational communities, returning seasonal labourers, migrant workers, temporary diasporas and over-stayers. The Romanian press most often talks about 'temporary migration'[2] while a Romanian researcher refers to the experience as 'commuting' rather than migration.[3] The answer to the permanency or the degree to which the group actually becomes a diaspora often lies in the quality of the diasporic network established in the host country, which can be facilitated by legal frameworks and accidental circumstances.

Rogers Brubaker proposes a clear alternative to the usual problematic grouping and labelling of diasporic groups: 'I want to argue that we should think of diaspora not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim. […] As a category of practice, 'diaspora' is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties. It is often a category with a strong normative change. It does not so much *describe* the world as seek to *remake* it'.[4] This alternative offers the opportunity to subsume work migrants under the larger diasporic umbrella, while concurrently encompassing the geopolitical impact diasporic political claims have on inter-state relations.

Uneasy about the role such communities should play in the already uncomfortable relationships with neighbours and Western countries, the Romanian government prefers to talk about 'Romanian communities living abroad' rather than diasporas. With no prior structure or guidelines in place, the awkwardness is particularly evident in Romania's interaction with Western countries. This is due to a number of factors, one of which is the context of EU integration that constantly places Romania 'under the thumb' or the scrutiny of the European Union. The government seems to be in a particularly precarious position during EU negotiations, especially in regards to claiming rights on behalf of its own nationals. Another issue is the legality of many Romanians abroad. Visa and work restrictions in most EU countries lead to a high number of so-called 'illegals.' The situation is further complicated by the negative

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2   *Cotidianul* (Romanian national newspaper), 24 February 2006.
3   Constantin, Florentina: Migrating or Commuting? The Case of Romanian Workers in Italy: Niches for Labour Commuting to the EU. *EUMap.org*, 2004.
4   Brubaker, Rogers: The 'diaspora' diaspora. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 28, Nr. 1. January, 2005. 12.

coverage received by 'asylum seekers,' 'immigrants' and particularly Roma in much of the Western press.

In 2005 over four billion Euros[5] entered Romania through remittances. With nine per cent of households having a family member at work abroad and with an average stay of 23 months, remittances sent by work migrants are second only to international business investments in terms of external financing[6] in Romania. Apart from the obvious financial and economic implications, they increasingly play a role in Europeanization and the circulation of information, ideas and popular culture values. A recent report by the Institute of Public Policy Research in the UK concerning the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 emphasises this important aspect. 'Bulgarians and Romanians can access the labour markets of other countries to improve their own economies, either through the sending of remittances, or through the increased productivity rates, business skills and technical abilities of returning migrants.'[7]

Yet despite their role in Europeanization and the circulation of information and 'know how', migrant workers remain largely overlooked by the government who construct the nation in a rather "traditional" fashion, not taking into account the way travel and new communication technologies impact on the formation of identity. Hence, the government's focus is on historical groups living outside its immediate territory rather than on more recent but territorial-distant settlers. This is even in spite of evidence that such groups begin to display some characteristics of permanent settlement irrespective of their imagined return or multiple travels to the "homeland." Somehow, economic visibility has not seemed to translate into political visibility.

One of the six State Secretaries affiliated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is in charge of coordinating the Department for the Relations with the Romanians Living Abroad (DRRLA). The functions of this ministerial department indicate how the nation outside the borders of the nation-state is perceived. They involve:

- Support for communities living abroad with the aim of preserving their ethnic, cultural and religious identity;

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5 *Cotidianul*, 24 February 2006.
6 http://www.euractiv.ro/content/section|readStory/stID_22/pT_dosare/pID_258/Banii-trimisi-din-strainatate-fenomen-social.html
7 Institute of Public Policy Research (http://www.ippr.org) 'EU Enlargement: Bulgaria and Romania – migration implications for the UK' April 2006. 4.

- Monitoring minority rights and collaborating with governments in host countries;
- Promoting Romania's image abroad through supporting Romanian organizations and associations;
- Reciprocal arrangements with countries where Romanians reside.

The department is organized according to concentric areas of interest – focusing on neighbouring countries first, then encompassing the Balkan area and finally the larger diaspora.

Nowhere on the MFA's website are work rights mentioned; instead, it focuses on ethnic and cultural rights, mainly the protection of the Romanian language and its use, as well as the survival and protection of education facilities, including Orthodox churches. The Law for the Support of Romanians Living Abroad underpins these aims. The law encompasses people who 'freely assume Romanian cultural identity,' namely people of 'Romanian origin' living 'outside Romanian borders.' Again, the emphasis is on cultural and linguistic identity (knowledge of Romanian is considered to be an important cultural marker and a verifier of authenticity), but it is also important to note that free choice underlies the claim to a Romanian national identity.

Most of the DRRLA's work consists of financing different projects that are believed to support the aforementioned aims. Financed activities for communities in Western Europe in 2005 included exhibitions (France), music festivals in the UK, Germany, Austria and Ireland, contributions to the Romanian Orthodox Church in Berlin and to the 'Romanian House' in Portugal. The sums have been symbolic in most cases and the causes have been cultural as opposed to political. It is unclear how the DRRLA supports community rights and there are no details about bi-lateral agreements.

In addition, the MFA boasts a Forum for Romanian Communities Living Abroad and the Consultative Council of Romanians Living Abroad. The first meets once a year to provide feedback on issues and needs. The latter is constituted of 25 members nominated and chosen through consultations with diasporas; it meets twice a year to propose strategies for helping Romanian communities abroad. Neither is representative of work migrants or other newly established diasporic communities.

During a 2005 tour of neighbouring as well as Western countries by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Romanian migrants raised the follow-

ing issues: help with recognising Romanian certificates, diplomas and degrees, guides regarding the legal and illegal immigration system in the host countries, the recognition of Romanian Orthodox churches (Italy), promoting a better imagine for Romania in preparation for EU accession, supporting Romanian schools (Germany).[8] A few of these requests were political in nature, but apart from printing and distributing of leaflets with legal information in Romanian in a number of EU states, the MFA has not actually proposed coherent strategies to address these concerns. Increasingly, prospective work migrants (or 'pre-migrants') turn to diasporic websites and chat groups for legal information as well as for strategies for successful emigration.

Arrangements such as these that fall between the private and the public, the unofficial and the official, are the first sign of an attempt to politicise diasporas. Politically active diasporas can become lobbying tools as they promote favourable policies towards the homeland. This strategy is happily met by the diaspora's desire to contribute to the country's image, which indirectly can affect its own status in the host state.

But, since there is traditionally a difficult relationship between state and civic associations, between public and private, in most cases the state is replaced by an industry of intermediaries and semi-official agencies. One such example is the Romanian Office for Labour Force Migration,[9] which is one of the most consistent examples of the Romanian Government's attempt to legalise work migration. A screening programme ensures that the demands of receiving countries are met. This includes screening for age, education, qualifications, work experience, and even health standards. Intermediaries scan for young people (26-35) with medium or degree education and work contracts are signed only upon proof of professional experience, perfect health and even average weight.[10]

In an attempt to open communication channels between Romanian and its diasporas, some Romanian embassies have recently asked diasporic communities for feedback on the consular services offered as well as their experiences using such services. Nevertheless, in everyday business affairs, diasporas can at most rely on cultural centres and non-

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[8]   All information and data about Romanians living abroad is available on the website of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs http://www.mae.ro
[9]   http://www.omfm.ro/w3c/index.php
[10] *România Liberă* (Romanian national newspaper), 7 February 2006, cited in *Info News*.

governmental cultural organizations such as the Ratiu Family Founda-
tion in London. The lack of permanent and appropriate structures of
support has led to the establishment of diasporic websites that – impor-
tant as they are – can only partially fulfil the increasing information and
networking demands.

Although unofficial and grassroots initiatives such as websites fill cer-
tain information gaps, they have at least one significant problem: diasporic
networks exhibit an acute democratic deficit. People within these commu-
nities are often disenfranchised in the host countries, unless they obtain
residence or citizenship rights; they also find it difficult to participate in
home country politics. For example, voting in national elections can only
be performed in Romanian embassies. There are currently no postal or
electronic facilities. After the 2004 national and presidential elections, this
prompted the Romanian Council in Atlanta sign an official complaint on
behalf of the 10 million Romanians living abroad. The complaint lodged
claimed that long distances precluded the majority of Romanians living
abroad from exercising their voting rights.[11] As there are still currently
no plans to change the voting system or facilitate voting mechanisms for
Romanians abroad, the result is that many members of the migrant com-
munity lack any form of practical citizenship. Empowering them repre-
sents an important future endeavour.

It seems that at present the state encounters difficulties in establish-
ing a direct relationship with diverse, mobile work migrant communities.
Due to the absence of previously recognized systems and a traditional
understanding of the nation as a historical attachment to a territory and
community of language – which leaves deterritorialised diasporic com-
munities outside the national frame – there is also lack of trust. These
communities turn to other support mechanisms, like new media, that
can reproduce narratives of belonging and identity. Diasporic discourses
can, thus, construct a virtual symbolic home. It is the government's duty
to begin to accommodate these alternative discourses within the larger
national narrative and offer more comprehensive and varied support.

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11 In *Observatorul* (Romanian newspaper in Canada), 12 June 2004.

Legal arrangements for work migrants in host countries

Particularly after the 2004 enlargement, EU members are equally guilty of slow reactions with regard to the phenomenon of work migration. Some of the anti-Eastern European hysteria demonstrated by the right wing tabloid press in countries like Britain can be partially attributed to the lack of prior preparation and correct information about the impact of enlargement on Western countries. So far, Western legal provisions have been largely national and reactive in nature. There has been no attempt at creating a European-wide system of integrating communities of work migrants or at protecting workers rights. A few examples spring to mind about the different ways governments have dealt with these issues thus far.

The number of Romanians is estimated to be approximately a million in Italy and half a million in Spain.[12] The lower cultural and linguistic barriers explain these high numbers. During the March 11, 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, Romania was the country with the highest casualty toll after Spain with fifteen Romanians losing their lives. Survivors and families of Romanian casualties were given indefinite leave of stay in the aftermath of this catastrophic event. The legal changes paved the way for the establishment of more permanent and legal Romanian communities. Spain's policy, then, is a clear example of localised and reactive provisions.

When Romania joins the EU in January 2007, the number of Romanians working abroad legally might increase even further. Some of these will establish more permanent communities and exhibit characteristics that have been previously used to describe diasporas. This is what Tsagarousianou calls 'their self-mobilization around their awareness of themselves as a diaspora […] their ability to imagine themselves as such, to imagine and construct the relevant transactional linkages … [that] require diasporic institutions.'[13]

While diasporic media and community associations are examples of self-mobilization, perhaps the most telling sign is the preparations that Romanians in Spain are making for the 2007 local elections. At this time, the community plans to propose local candidates in areas (e.g. Castellon)

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[12] http://www.fedrom.org
[13] Tsagarousianou, op. cit. 63.

where Romanians make up ten per cent of voters. Both PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) and PP (Popular Party) are said to be backing Romanian candidates.[14] This shows that in some parts of Europe Romanian communities are starting to tip the political scales and make the shift from economic to political visibility.

In 2003 Italy also began offering the *permesso di soggiorno* (permit to stay). This residence and work permit, which is renewable every four years, was made available upon proof of employment to many previously illegal workers in an attempt to legalise their status and control their whereabouts.[15] These provisions came as a result of the Italian government's desire to address the perceived high number of illegal workers. It is, again, a national and reactive initiative.

The Romanian Home Affairs Minister estimates the number of Romanian migrants in the UK to be 47,000[16] as legal barriers have prevented many Romanians from either entering the country (Romanians still need a visa to travel to UK, while the rest of the EU has lifted this requirement in January 2002) or from legalising their status. More intermediary workforce companies are, nevertheless, offering jobs in the UK. IPPR's recent report predicts that after the January 2007 enlargement, the UK is to expect 41,000 new work migrants from Romania.[17]

Although the legal propensity thus far has been to stem the influx of migrant workers, there are now attempts to explore other systems. More 'conservative' countries like Germany legislatively ensure that work is performed by Germans when and wherever possible, as Reuters reports, in order to reduce the number of foreign workers by ten percent,[18] but other countries are considering adopting systems similar to the American "green card." According to a recent report published by the Rowntree Foundation, Britain is inviting consultation on a five-tier classification system that rewards qualified workers; the system is due to be implemented sometime in 2007.[19] This new policy is partially the result of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. It is also yet another example policy

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14 *Cotidianul*, 17 December 2005.
15 http://www.trafficking.org.ph/poea/index.htm
16 *Cotidianul*, 16 September 2005.
17 IPPR, 31.
18 *Jurnalul Național* (Romanian national newspaper), 9 January 2006.
19 Available at http://www.policyhub.gov.uk

implemented at the local level without consideration of a more coherent and integrated European policy.

As long as migrant workers do not achieve political visibility, there is very little chance that discriminatory practices and the widespread lack of support will disappear. These communities need to make the switch from being backward-looking to forward-looking and should also become active with regards to work rights as well as other legal and cultural provisions, especially since the EU currently lacks legal harmonisation. A common EU system of support for migrant workers could address clear discriminative practices such as lower pay, bans on union participation, patchy medical assistance and suspended citizenship rights.

It seems clear that there is still some reluctance on the part of Romanians to embark on a process of self-reflection and definition. This was indicated in a set of three interviews conducted by *Repere romanesti*, a Romanian diasporic publication on the net,[20] with heads of Romanian associations in Italy and Spain. The president of one such organization in Padova Italy, Associazione Alleanza Romena, laments Romanians' lack of confidence in associations of this kind, their tendency to join only when in need of free legal aid, and their reluctance to develop their own, separate media.

The Spanish Federation of the Associations for Romanian Immigrants notes a similar reluctance. The officials representing the Federation, which encompasses ten different associations, lament the bad image Romanians have in Spain, such as the Spanish complaints of a Romanian 'invasion'. Although Spanish society seems more accepting of immigrants after the March 2004 Madrid terrorist attacks, these types of complaints amplify inferiority complexes for many Romanians who are settled illegally and poorly paid. The Federation complains of the same 'disjoining' felt by their Italian counterparts, and Romanians seem to find it difficult to come together despite of occasional discrimination and bad press. Nevertheless, a new, mostly virtual, media-endorsed (including newspapers, radio, and web) diasporic-space is taking shape.

This tentative progress needs to be continued in order to allow temporary diasporas to cultivate their own cultural conditions, understand the mechanisms through which symbolic homes are built and constantly

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20 http://www.repereromanesti.ro

remade, and reflect upon resistance and '*ressentiment*'. In turn, this can lead to a more consistent and politically articulate discourse of claims.

Diasporas and the role of symbolic geography

Considering the positive impact millions of diasporans are making in Europe today, the lack of legal support by either home or host countries seems puzzling. Migrant workers clearly address skill and employment gaps in Western economies. As the IPPR's report acknowledges, 'Romanian-born are more likely to enter the UK in the higher skilled routes of work permits, au pair and student visas.'[21] Despite fears of a 'youth drain,' the return of short-term migrant workers to the home country means financial and intellectual capital, which is essential for Eastern Europe's developing economies.

Because diasporas will continue to be a permanent presence and a point of contention between EU member states in the future, bi-lateral agreements are necessary. Taking into consideration that Romanian's "preferred destination countries are determined by their geographic and linguistic accessibility […] the Romanian Office for Labour Force Migration has" been developing "bi-lateral agreements" with countries that "feature in the preferred destinations of Romanians."[22] Yet geography (East and West, North and South) is still symbolically and ideologically loaded, and the continent seems to remain divided. There are also the questions of commitment raised by receiving countries and '*ressentiment*' on the part of host countries. Both hamper bi-lateral strategies and agreements, making it difficult to proceed.

As one geography researcher warns, "given the increased capacity for diasporas to 'act at a distance' due to technological advances in communication, and indeed the greater prevalence of diaspora communities in the contemporary world, we need to reconsider the ways that we think about the nation and *its* territorialities, as well as diaspora and *its* territorialities."[23] Symbolic geography needs to be reconfigured to reflect new ideologies rather than old divisions.

In time, diasporas staking their claims and initiating a political project will address this. Much of the current research looks towards

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21 IPPR, 22.
22 IPPR, 23.
23 Carter, Sean: The Geopolitics of Diaspora. *Area*, Vol. 37. Nr. 1, 2005. 61.

North America where more established diasporas display more pro-nounced political activism. Future research needs to explore diasporas' uses of media and new media. It should especially consider how these media forms aim to acquire symbolic capital, legitimate authority, and – above all – access to public opinion. The research field of diasporic agendas, mobilization and active strategies is supported by the produc-tion and consumption of diasporic media, but this process is too recent to have yielded any clear results yet.

Since it sits perfectly between the private and public spheres, new media can be the appropriate vehicle to transcend the borders that diasporas seem to naturally construct. These diasporic self-imposed boundaries are erected both because of internal causes, and under external influences (i.e. exclusion); it is, therefore, important to further address the issue of space and geography, which are essential not only for diasporic identity but also for analysing the ideological weight of sym-bolic geography and it's relationship to the capabilities and opportunities offered by new media like the Internet.

The identity of temporary diasporas, such as migrant worker groups, is defined by the journey's experience, which often includes a real and/ or imagined repeated return: '…these multiple journeys may con-figure into one journey via a *confluence of narratives* as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. It is within this confluence of narrativity that 'diasporic community' is differently imagined under dif-ferent historical circumstances. By this I mean that the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is con-stituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the eve-ryday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively.'[24] This is the typical experience for an increasing number of people. Since population mobility is changing under the impact of new transport and commu-nication technologies, Castels was right to note that migration is never one-way.[25]

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[24] Brah, Avtar: *Cartographies of Diaspora. Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996. 183.

[25] Castles, Stephen: *Ethnicity and Globalization. From Migrant Worker to Transnational Citizen*. London: Sage, 2000. 204.

Because 'diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere,'[26] the feeling of loss, the nostalgia and uprooting that come with the journey – whether it is real or imagined – fuel the establishment of a culturally-mobile shelter. 'On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin.' On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality.'[27]

This view is supported by many media scholars who emphasise the importance of communication networks for the 'new possibilities of being in two places at once,'[28] the opportunities of 'producing *new spaces* where remote localities and their experiences come together and become 'synchronised'[29] and the ability to 'live at the same time in both the global and the local.'[30] Since home is experienced symbolically and synchronically, it travels together with the migrant and adjusts accordingly. 'Diaspora' refers to the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places – their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with "back home."[31]

Whether migrating mentally[32] or physically, the migrant succumbs to constant comparisons between a simultaneous *here* and *there* that lead to an inferiority complex. This has been aptly described by Greenfeld as '*ressentiment.*'[33] Metaphorical otherness re-assigns ideological connotations to the geographical space and feelings of inadequacy while humiliating experiences – coupled nevertheless with the desire to escape what is regarded as an unfortunate original faith – produce '*ressentiment'* towards a West that remains intangible.

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26 Brah, 182.
27 Brah, 192.
28 Scannell, Paddy: *Radio, Television and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. 91.
29 Tsagarousianou, 62.
30 Rantanen, Terhi: *The Media and Globalization*. London: Sage, 2005. 121.
31 Lavie, S. and T. Swedeburg (eds.): *Displacement, Diasporas and Geographies of Identity*. Duke University Press, 1996. 14.
32 For an comprehensive analysis of mental migration see Sabry, Tarik: *The Day Moroccans Gave Up Couscous for Satellites: Global TV, Structures of Feeling, and Mental Migration*. Transnational Broadcasting Studies, Number 14, Spring/Summer, 2005.
33 Greenfeld, Liah: *Nationalism. Five Roads to Modernity*. Harvard University Press, 1992.

A narrative of blame permeates diasporic discourse. Several Romanian writers have pointed out that the myth of historical injustice and of the universal conspiracy against the East are quite common across the Balkans.[34] While this view is still well preserved in popular consciousness, returning Romanian migrants have modified it somewhat. This is because their perceptions of the West entail both an outsider's and insider's knowledge. Their double presence in a *here* and *there* has added a desire for Westernisation to the original *'ressentiment'*.

Symbolic geography, the mechanism through which a community sees itself in relation to others on a symbolic map, leads to clusters of journey narratives and a constant reworking of identity through the process of imagining and translating details into discourse. Hence, symbolic journeys reconfigure geography: constructing West and East as contiguous, symbolic spaces; their relationships to both spaces shaping and renegotiating their identities; constructing home as a symbolic rather than a real space. Migrants live simultaneously *here* and *there*, but the production and consumption of media lead to the formation of a "third space.' This 'third space' is the locus of an 'imagined community'[35] that is constructed and remembered through certain cultural symbols that can be retraced within diasporic websites.

The architecture of diasporic websites is a good indicator of the cultural markers that send the migrant on symbolic voyages home. Similarly, chat rooms and discussion groups describe the way the group places itself between host and home spaces as well as indicate the role nostalgia and memory play in the process of constructing a 'third space' that allows a unique diasporic identity to be articulated.

A two-way exchange occurs between these diasporic third spaces and geographical location. The material world impacts the formation of diasporic third spaces; the interactions within the diasporic network impact enacted identity. This exchange is beneficial inasmuch as can facilitate the political visibility of migrant groups and lead eventual political activism.

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34 Boia, Lucian: *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness.* Central European University Press, 2001. 207–9; Tismăneanu, Vladimir: *Fantasmele salvării. Democrație, naționalism și mit în Europa post-comunistă.* Iași: Polirom, 1999. 111.

35 Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso, 1991.

Yet because home is constructed at both ends of the journey and migrants position themselves at a mobile axis and within a liquid, perpetually moulded space, diasporic group risk of not looking forward, not developing language of claims, and remaining politically vulnerable.

In the absence of a definition of the nation that encompasses the identity of work diasporas and equally in the absence of a multicultural approach and legal support from the 'host', new media is able to represent an alternative space for diasporic identity construction. This space is virtual and symbolic yet grounded in the geographical locality; it is both private and public. The two diasporic websites used by the new Romanian diaspora in the UK can serve as examples of the narration of identity and claim discourses within new media.

New media as a diasporic 'third place'

New media is suited to the basic traits of diasporic groups because it offers new opportunities for the intermeshing of private and public. 'For a displaced people in the diaspora, cyberspace can be an alternative "territory", where a transnational community or a virtual neighbourhood can be constructed.'[36] As Graham and Khosravi explain, cyberspace provides a forum where different generations can meet, where identity and meaning are continuously reworked, where the homeland is imagined and where accounts of the past can be accumulated. It is ultimately a place where public and private meet.[37]

Apart from times of national crisis that are able to mobilize diasporas and re-orient them to the realities of 'home,' 'banal nationalism' is embedded in everyday practices. New media is 'banal.' It is part of everyday, mundane practices; hence, it is the perfect vehicle for the reproduction of 'banal nationalism.'[38]

Diasporic research recommends selection of websites through a search engine (i.e. Google), followed by an examination of the links and rhetoric

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[36] Graham, M. & S. Khosravi: Reordering Public and Private in Iranian Cyberspace: Identity, Politics, and Mobilization. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, Nr. 9, 2002. 228.

[37] Graham and Khosravi, 219-246.

[38] Billig, Michael: *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage, 1995.

provided.[39] Alternatively, research can be based upon a combination of user site-recommendations and key-word searches. Logs should be kept as proof of monitoring period.[40] The websites http://www.romani.co.uk/ and http://www.romani-online.co.uk/ were selected as websites predominantly used by Romanians in the UK according to this method. Other websites were eliminated because they either did not cater to migrant groups entirely or were affiliated with official state organizations.

Most website analyses look at the following traits:

- The 'architecture' or 'layering' of websites,[41] i.e. the richness of content providing information, news, context, analysis, commentary, discussion forum, feedback, archives, and links;
- Format and design, amount of content, customisation and access, immediacy, hyperlinking and interactivity;[42]
- The 'archaeology' of websites including heritage, lifestyle, spiritual matters and their manifestation. This method follows similar research involved in conducting textual analysis of Internet forums as well as the use of text and images to construct online imaginaries;[43]
- Other attributes evident in chat or e-mail exchanges indicating whether the diaspora is backward or forward looking, i.e. whether it is re-enacting past historical traumas and inferiority complexes or whether it looks beyond these towards the construction of unique and novel opportunities;
- The demography of audiences and users as well as the interplay between monologue and dialogue.[44] Hiller and Franz differentiate between pre-migrants, post-migrants and settled migrants.[45] These groups become self-evident in their different use of websites, which are constructed to cater to the different needs of these main user-groups.

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[39] Siapera, Eugenia: Multiculturalism online. The Internet and the dilemmas of multicultural politics. *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 9. Nr. 1. 2006. 5–24.

[40] Hiller, H. H. & T. M. Franz: New ties, old ties and lost ties: the use of Internet in diaspora. *New Media & Society*, Vol. 6. Nr. 6, 2004. 731–752.

[41] Campbell, Vincent: *Information Age Journalism. Journalism in an International Context*. London: Arnold, 2004.

[42] Gunter, Barrie: *News and the Net*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003.

[43] Chan, Brenda: Imagining the Homeland: The Internet and Diasporic Discourse of Nationalism. *Journal of Communication Inquiry,* Vol. 29, Nr. 4, 2005. 336–368.

[44] Siapera, op. cit.

[45] Hiller and Franz, op. cit.

The two selected websites display particular characteristics that can reveal identity discourses and political activism. The demography of users is, again, similar to the Romanian population in the UK. There are a higher proportion of couples and married members (some with English spouses); most possess a higher or medium level education, and only a few are employed in manual labour. This impacts how identity discourses are articulated and the amount of criticism levelled at particular institutions and authorities. As they have no plans for immediate return, the group also appears to be settled. The IPPR's report quoted above concludes that the scale of Romanian work migration will remain low even after 2007 because the distance and the resettlement costs in Britain are relatively high and will lead many to choose countries closer to home. This, of course, is debatable and will only be proven after January 2007; yet, it may explain why the 100,000 Romanian work migrants in Britain view the country as a long-stay destination. Permanent or semi-permanent settlement can cushion the effects of distance and high costs.

A primary function of diasporic websites is providing advise to pre-migrants and survival information to newcomers. These websites achieve this by hyper-linking to the relevant institutions. Similarly, chat groups offer more established migrant workers the opportunity to reflect on issues such as the characteristic of host populations, difficulties with integration, mixed marriages, perceptions of Romania and Romanians abroad, EU enlargement, East-West and self/other identities.

The 'architecture' of the websites is complex. There are multiple layers and an abundance of hyperlinks that encompass practical information (visas, driving a car, scholarships, recognition of Romanian qualifications, jobs) for 'pre-migrants' and 'newcomers' as well as links to host institutions and diasporic organisations that cater to more settled migrants. The e-mail exchanges reveal strong negative sentiment towards consular services. They sharply criticise the staffing, price, quality, and official institutions' lack of support for the diasporic group. Comments generally support lifting travel visas for Romanian citizens. There is also great hope expressed about EU accession.

In relation to this, there is a preoccupation with the representation of the country outside of Romania. There is the feeling that a bad image affects how community members are perceived in the host country. Some members display feelings of shame, but these are combated by highlighting the group's positive traits like openness, humour and conviviality.

In response to obvious information needs, news from the host countries as well as news regarding European decisions affecting migrants and the welfare of Romanian groups across Europe is updated weekly. Criticism of current legal systems that develops in chat rooms and e-mail exchanges on these websites is a first step towards community mobilisation and expression of its political identity. This is, nevertheless, in its formative years because of the recent settlement of these communities and the increased mobility of some of its members, i.e. those who return home after short periods and are replaced by other newcomers. But the websites are attempting to establish their own history and insure their continuation by calling for political activism whenever there is a lag in the pace of information exchange.

Identity is supported through memory (of dishes, places, music, events), humour and re-enacting the perceived difference between the group and the host population. Patriotism and nostalgia are expressed through stereotypical ethnic imagery (flags, maps, Romanian folk costume, and pictures of landmarks: churches, Dracula's castle, Danube Delta). Thus, the websites conform to expectations outsiders might have about Romanian identity, yet they add foreign cultural markers, like English flags and images, and a wealth of news and links that serve to anchor the diaspora to local and general European spaces. One reason why ethnic stereotypes are reinforced is that the group needs to construct its own identity. This is initially accomplished by emphasising those characteristics that are perceived as unique and are confirmed by the outsiders' interpretation of them. External stereotypes are, therefore, adopted and reinforced.

Based on Castells's theory of nodes and flows within a network and relationships between networks,[46] it is evident that the diasporic networks are dominated by 'geometries of power.'[47] This becomes apparent in the number of stars attached to contributors that signal their capability to drive or, contrariwise, remain spectators to the debate. The number of stars depends upon the time spent in Britain, time devoted to and the particular internet group, and the wealth of connections established within the virtual diasporic community. Diasporic discussion groups seemingly mimic 'real' communities: they have rules, hierarchies, insider-versus-out-

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[46] Castells, Manuel: *The Rise of the Network Society.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 501.
[47] Dodge, M. & R. Kitchin: *Mapping Cyberspace.* London: Routledge, 2001. 55.

sider pattern, and also attempt self-empowerment and external assertive-
ness. 'Newcomers' receive a frosty welcome, which indicates that groups
reject 'floaters' and only accept committed members.

As the group attempts to avoid possible outside participation, there
is diffidence towards non-Romanians attempting to infiltrate the group.
Boundaries are erected on such occasions. For example, in July 2006
during a website debate (http://www.romani.co.uk/) in preparation
for the group's meeting in Stratford Upon Avon on 15 July, one of the
participants proposed inviting an English friend. The discussion that
ensued revealed that the friend was a sociologist interested in studying
diasporic or migrant worker communities. The debate quickly switched
to how the group felt about being 'observed.' Examples like this prove
that diasporic identity constructed through websites and chat groups fol-
lows the usual mechanisms of identity formation, including erection of
boundaries as well as an 'us' versus 'them' positioning.

Through mechanisms such as these, migrant workers attempt to
understand their own position. The resulting discursive practices and
structuring narratives position the group neither *here* nor *there*, but in
a 'third space', ideally supported by new media.

Conclusion

Although the phenomenon of work migration is not new, the cur-
rent scale and distinctive characteristics are unprecedented; therefore,
new research tools are needed to understand not only identity construc-
tion of work migrant communities but also the role they play in inter-
state relations, particularly between the European East and West.

One way of understanding the evolution of the discourse of claims
is the study of diasporic websites developed in recent years and contrib-
uting to the solidification of the diaspora's presence in the host coun-
try. Yet, diasporic space is never built without reference to home and the
experience of multiple mental and physical journeys. These particular
experiences condition the diaspora to become a community of claims
and political awareness as it provides the group the experience with dif-
ferent systems, institutions, public opinions and fields of interaction nec-
essary for political mobilization.

The impact is, therefore, multifaceted. First of all, work migrants
will develop new media technologies to suit their needs and will use

them to build a coherent political stance that will be grounded in their multicultural, cosmopolitan experience helping them to adapt to local circumstances and challenge the status quo. Further, work migrants already challenge the current understanding of national identity in much of Eastern Europe, pushing for a more civic rather than ethnic understanding of national maintenance and reproduction. Work migrants also continue to challenge the current legal provisions in some Western countries, which are already trying new visa and settlement models. The need for a more coherent European system has become apparent and will continue to grow more crucial. Further ethnographic research will be able to contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between culture, technology and state institutions.