



The reconfiguration of social values through migration: The motivations of Romanians settled in the United States

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Abstract

Romanian migration to the United States is shaped by a set of distinctive characteristics generated by socio-economic and cultural factors, which significantly influence the processes of adaptation and reconfiguration of social values within the migratory experience. This study aims to examine the social values underlying the emigration decisions of Romanians settled in American communities, drawing upon the motives identified through research and outlining the defining features of this phenomenon. The analysis is grounded in two major analytical perspectives: migration theories — represented by the push–pull model and Douglas Massey’s theory — and social value theories, as formulated by authors such as Thomas R. Rochon, Raymond Boudon, Rudolf Rezsöházy, Shalom H. Schwartz, and Ronald Inglehart. Methodologically, a thematic analysis was applied to a corpus of 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with members of Romanian communities in the American diaspora. The findings reveal four central dynamics: (1) family remains a core value, but its meaning shifts toward ensuring stability, intergenerational security, and access to opportunities unavailable in Romania; (2) work is reinterpreted through meritocracy and fairness, contrasting with corruption and nepotism in the country of origin; (3) education emerges as both a pathway to professional advancement and a mechanism for transmitting new values to younger generations; and (4) cultural identity, while preserved through language and traditions, is continuously renegotiated in interaction with American norms.

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A key contribution of the study is the identification of a value gap between Romanian migration to North America and to Europe: while European migration is often driven by short-term economic motives, U.S. migration is strongly associated with aspirational, identity-based goals centered on self-actualisation, dignity, and long-term integration. This research highlights migration as not merely a geographical relocation, but a profound process of value transformation and self-reconstruction, aligning individual trajectories with ideals of freedom, recognition, and social justice.

Keywords

Economic migration; Social values; Emigrant community; Transnationalism; Push–pull factors;

Introduction

International migration constitutes a complex process with multidimensional effects on society, influencing both social structures and individual experiences. This phenomenon compels individuals and communities to develop new forms of interaction and to undergo significant transformations. In this context, values and norms regarded as traditional are frequently subjected to processes of reconfiguration, as migrants adapt to cultural and social environments different from those of their country of origin.

Recent decades have witnessed an unprecedented scale of Romanian emigration, positioning the country among the EU member states with the highest emigration rates relative to population size. Eurostat (2020) estimated that over 3.6 million Romanians—nearly one-fifth of the population—were residing abroad. More recent data from the OECD (2024) confirm the persistence of this trend, with over 260,000 new emigrants recorded in 2022, representing a 9 percent increase compared to 2021. Romanian migrants remain highly concentrated in Italy, Spain, and Germany, while a steadily expanding diaspora is also observed in North America. Previous research (Sandu 2006; Sandu, Toth, and Tudor 2018) has conceptualized migration as a structural and predictable phenomenon, embedded in both public discourse and policy agendas. While the economic, demographic, political, and legal dimensions of Romanian migration are well documented, the cultural underpinnings and value-based motivations remain underexplored, despite their long-term impact on individual trajectories and community transformations.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to contribute to an understanding of how social values shape the decisions and experiences of Romanian migrants, with particular emphasis on the specificities of communities established in the United States of America.

This work investigates social values as reflected in the reasons for permanent emigration among Romanians settled in the American diaspora. The starting point is the research question formulated within the broader project of which this analysis forms a part: *How are changing social values reflected in the emigration motives of Romanians in the U.S. diaspora?* The study aims to highlight the ways in which social values are reshaped

through changes in life context and the accumulation of new experiences in a culturally distinct environment. The analysis of participants' accounts of their migration motivations reconstructs a value system in processes of transformation and negotiation. The study does not employ a longitudinal design but instead captures migrants' meaning-making, revealing perceived shifts in relation to the society of origin. The findings underscore the extent to which the rationales underpinning the decision to emigrate signal changes in social values and the presence of values subject to reinterpretation in the migration context.

The analysis is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, migration theories are employed to delineate the conceptual context and define the general analytical parameters of the study. Subsequently, theories concerning the change and adaptation of social values are integrated, providing an interpretive framework capable of capturing in depth the dynamics of these values within the migration experience.

The examination of the motivations expressed by respondents from migrant communities draws on three major theoretical orientations. The first is the theory of push–pull factors, one of the most influential approaches in migration studies (King 2012; de Haas 2007), which explains initial motivations through the interplay of unfavorable conditions in the country of origin (push factors) and perceived opportunities in the destination country (pull factors). The second orientation is represented by theories of integration and assimilation in international migration, with particular attention to the unified theory of migration (Massey et al. 1998). This framework facilitates an understanding of how the migration experience influences social values, emphasizing their dynamic, negotiable, and contextual nature, subject to continual reconfiguration between the origin and destination spaces. The third orientation is based on the theory of transnational migration (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2008; Portes, Escobar, and Radford 2007), which holds that transformations in social values cannot be reduced to processes of assimilation or integration but instead encompass negotiation, hybridization, and ongoing adaptation within multiple social spaces. Together, these perspectives establish an integrated conceptual framework capable of capturing migration both as a process of geographical mobility and as a complex phenomenon of social change with profound implications at both individual and community levels.

The second perspective employed in the analysis of social values draws on postmodern theories of value change developed by Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, Rudolf Rezsohazy, Thomas R. Rochon, Raymond Boudon, and Shalom H. Schwartz. Boudon's contributions enable an examination of values from the standpoint of rational choice and methodological individualism, facilitating an understanding of value change as the outcome of individual reasoning and decision-making in specific social contexts. Schwartz's theoretical model (1994) offers a classification of values as individual motivations and conceptualizes them as universal structures organized along opposing dimensions (e.g., autonomy vs. conformity, openness to change vs. conservation), providing a relevant analytical tool for understanding value transformations in intercultural and migratory contexts. The theoretical framework advanced by Inglehart and Welzel

(2005), grounded in empirical research, describes the dynamics of values along two main poles: traditional (religious) and modern (secular). Complementarily, Rochon (1998) and Rezsohazy (2008) adopt a qualitative approach to analyzing value change at the societal level, paying particular attention to social issues, crises, and social movements, which they regard as essential factors in the reconfiguration of values.

These perspectives involve the investigation of the socialization process of individuals, their exposure to new ideas and experiences, and the resulting changes in the structure of individual beliefs, perceptions, and ideas, which have a direct impact on the value system of the community to which they belong. Consequently, social values can be analyzed as principles, ideals, and beliefs that a society or an individual considers essential, influencing the decision to migrate and significantly shaping the social structure.

This study relies on a triadic theoretical framework that brings coherence to the analysis. Migration theories explain mobility as both a structural response and a process of cross-border adaptation. Theories of social value change account for the ways in which values evolve through individual reasoning, generational dynamics, and societal transformations. At their intersection, the link between migration and values highlights how mobility not only reflects but also reshapes value systems. Taken together, these perspectives provide an integrated foundation for understanding migration as a phenomenon of geographical movement, social negotiation, and value reconfiguration.

The objective of the research is to identify the value system underlying the reasons for emigration among Romanians settled in communities in the United States of America, with a focus on their dynamics in a comparative relationship between the country of origin and the country of destination. The analysis of the relationship between migratory motivations and social values, carried out from a comparative and contextual perspective, seeks to highlight the processes of transformation, preservation, and negotiation of values within the migration experience.

This analysis is part of a doctoral dissertation based on qualitative research dedicated to investigating the dynamics of social values within Romanian communities in the United States of America. Its primary objective is to develop an in-depth understanding of the value system that defines the Romanian immigrant community and its relationship with the society of origin. Data collection was conducted through online semi-structured interviews with 18 Romanian nationals who settled in the United States after 1980 and who are members of communities organized around churches (Anăstăsoaie 2024). This methodological approach made it possible to explore not only the individual motivations for migration but also the ways in which social values are preserved, transformed, or negotiated in the context of the migration experience.

Methodology

The analysis is based on accounts obtained from 18 semi-structured, individual interviews conducted remotely via videoconference. Thematic analysis was employed to identify the dominant motives for emigration, the social values associated with these motives, and

participants' perceptions of value similarities and differences between Romania and the United States of America.

The research also examined the dynamics of values in the migratory context — processes of change, preservation, or negotiation — as well as value projections for future generations, such as recommendations directed towards young people. The interpretation of the results was carried out comparatively, correlating the expressed motives and values with the socio-cultural context of the two countries, in order to highlight the reciprocal influences between the migratory experience and the reconfiguration of personal and community values.

The study draws on qualitative data collected between April and June 2022 through 16 semi-structured interviews with members of Romanian communities in the United States. Participants were recruited via e-mail invitations sent to over 260 parishes and community organizations, complemented by snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted individually online (Zoom), lasted about one hour, and were transcribed for thematic analysis. The sample, balanced by gender (8 women, 8 men) and ranging in age from 31 to 71 years, included both pre-1990 and post-1990 emigrants. Respondents were predominantly professionals with higher education, many holding master's or doctoral degrees, and active in medicine, education, clergy, science, or business. While recruitment posed challenges—such as language barriers among some non-Orthodox communities—the final group reflects professional migration profiles and provides insights into the value orientations of socially and economically stable diaspora members.

The qualitative analysis followed a systematic three-stage process. First, initial coding was undertaken by identifying and labelling relevant text segments according to motives for emigration, expressed values, and comparisons between Romanian and American society. In the second stage, the codes were grouped into central themes: dominant motives for emigration; associated social values (security, fairness, freedom, stability); comparative perceptions of values in Romania and the USA; and the dynamics of values (preserved, changed, or negotiated). The final stage involved reviewing the themes against the entire corpus of data, defining them conceptually, and naming them in accordance with the dominant meanings identified in participants' responses.

The analysis was written by integrating interpretations with significant excerpts from the interviews, in order to illustrate how social values are shaped and transformed in the migratory context.

Data analysis

The analysis of participants' narratives revealed a diverse spectrum of motivations underpinning the decision to migrate, outlining a complex process in which personal values intersect with reflections on individual life trajectories. The themes extracted illustrate both the determining factors for departure and the stages of adaptation within a new socio-cultural environment. The identified social values are embedded in economic, professional, cultural, religious, familial, political, and identity-related motives, while

participants' personal justifications for emigration sometimes reveal tensions between their own values and those dominant in the society of origin.

Economic factors: The pursuit of economic stability and opportunities for a better life

Economic and professional motives emerging from participants' accounts reflect social values in transition. The lack of advancement opportunities, reliance on personal connections to secure employment, low salaries, and performance evaluations disconnected from professional merit have eroded values associated with economic security, the dignity of work, and self-fulfilment. These systemic dysfunctions fostered the motivation to leave, fuelled by the desire to build a better future for oneself and one's family.

For some participants, migration represented an opportunity to capitalise on their professional training or to continue their studies. For instance, Ion stated: *"I completed a master's degree here. I did a PhD here."* Similarly, Paul recalled: *"I came here in '99, for a PhD in physics. [...] I completed it, then did a postdoc."* Other respondents were motivated by the prospect of stability and financial security, as illustrated by Simion: *"I felt that if I stayed in the country, it would take longer to secure [...] a financial status or a good future than if I went abroad."* Fane expressed a similar view: *"Here, if you work, it shows. You have a home, you have stability. It's not easy, but you know what you're working for."* In contrast to their experience in Romania, participants discovered in the United States a context in which work is valued, opportunities are real, and merit is recognised: *"Here they really... they trust you (...) if they see you're willing, that you work hard."* (Dora) These perceptions suggest that new social contexts can stimulate a reconfiguration of personal values.

A second major finding is the visible transition from survival-oriented values to self-actualisation values. This shift can be explained through Ronald Inglehart's model, which posits that the movement from survival values to self-expression values occurs under favourable social conditions. Migrants' economic motivations — the need for security, well-being, and professional respect — clearly illustrate this dynamic. The testimonies of Ana, Fane, Constanța, and Costică describe not only material difficulties and the absence of a decent standard of living but also increasingly strong aspirations toward autonomy and personal achievement. For example, Floarea stated: *"For me, freedom was the main reason,"* while Bob added: *"I wanted to get to a place where my work mattered."* Such statements underscore the shift from meeting immediate material needs to pursuing higher-order value aspirations, confirming the proposition that values evolve under the influence of the social context.

The need for financial security emerges both as a central motive for migration and as a core social value reflected in participants' aspirations. This is clearly illustrated in testimonies such as that of Nenea: *"Even if you have money, if you can't find a place to stay that's safe, it's pointless."* Similarly, Gheorghe affirmed: *"The ideal, or the main goal, was to achieve financial stability."* Such statements express not only dissatisfaction with economic conditions in Romania but also a clear prioritisation of material stability as both a personal and collective value. Financial security thus becomes a benchmark that guides migration

decisions and justifies adaptation to a new socio-economic context. Migration, therefore, is not solely driven by material shortages but also reflects a value reconstruction in which economic stability is perceived as a fundamental condition for a dignified and predictable life.

The predominance of economic motives in migration decisions is supported by fundamental values such as material security and the fair recognition and reward of effort, confirming the interdependence between individual value orientations and collective actions. When interpreted through the lens of push–pull theory and Inglehart’s model, the findings indicate a transition from survival values (security, financial stability, fulfilment of basic needs) to self-expression and self-actualisation values (freedom, autonomy, professional recognition, education). The socio-economic environment in the United States facilitates this shift, providing the conditions necessary for the fulfilment of higher-order aspirations. In this process, financial security functions as a pivotal value: not merely an economic objective, but a precondition for dignity, stability, and predictability, linking basic needs to aspirational values.

Table 1. Push–pull factors and associated values for economic motivations

Push factors (Romania)	Values (Absent)	Pull factors (USA)	Aspirational values
Lack of meritocracy, nepotism	Meritocracy	Fair reward of competence, professional advancement	Fairness, recognition
Economic instability	Economic security	Opportunity to achieve financial stability	Well-being, dignified life
Corruption and lack of transparency	Integrity, justice	More transparent and predictable system	Institutional trust
Limited academic opportunities	Valuing education	Access to advanced education and scholarships	Self-actualization, competence
Lack of a predictable future	Personal progress	Stable socio-economic environment	Planning, predictability

An analysis through the lens of push–pull theory shows that Romanian migration to the United States is driven by the interaction between push factors — such as the lack of meritocracy, economic instability, corruption, and limited academic opportunities — and pull factors, including the recognition of work, access to advanced education, and the possibility of achieving financial stability. These factors are closely linked to a perceived value deficit in the country of origin and to the presence of aspirational values in the country of destination, such as fairness, autonomy, meritocracy, and self-actualisation. The unified migration model proposed by Douglas S. Massey provides a multi-level perspective: at the micro level, individual motivations revolve around the need for stability and recognition; at the meso-level, community networks facilitate integration and the attainment of value-related goals; at the macro level, structural differences between Romania and the United States create the conditions for a reconfiguration of the value

system. Social values thus emerge not only as consequences of migration but also as its triggering factors.

Professional fulfilment: The need for recognition, career progression, and personal development

For respondents, the transparent and merit-based systems in the United States are preferred over the nepotism and bureaucracy encountered in Romania. These differences underscore not only a change in mindset but also an urgent need for reform within the professional system. As Paul states: *“What I do here I could not do in Romania. I would lose my professional level.”* The recognition of personal value in the professional sphere thus serves as an indicator of the desire for a shift toward a fairer, performance-based system: *“In Romania, if you don’t have money or connections, it’s pointless to try. You can be ambitious and work hard, and still you can’t succeed. They stop you”* (Dora).

Personal autonomy and fairness emerge as central values in the migration experience, closely linked to the acknowledgement of individual merit. The statement *“for what you do, not for who you are”* (Dora) encapsulates the orientation toward a life model grounded in competence and personal effort. Within this framework, professional fulfilment becomes not only an individual goal but also a marker of the difference in mentality between Romania and the United States, where success is defined primarily by performance and personal contribution.

Another frequently mentioned value relates to participants’ relationship with work. Romanians in the U.S. perceive themselves as *“good workers”* and *“smart and resourceful”* (Dora). They place considerable importance on their careers, viewing them not merely as a means of subsistence but as life projects that shape all stages of existence. Ion emphasises this by stating: *“We invest a good part of our lives in education for a career, and if you choose a career you love, you do it out of vocation, which shapes your entire life.”* This vision of work is closely tied to moral values such as *“honesty, love, respect,”* which respondents seek to pass on to their children (Ileana). These principles are essential in both personal and professional life, reflecting what Romania represents for them, even though they are also recognised within the American system. Smaranda reinforces this point by noting that in the U.S., *“Americans accept—or rather, they don’t accept, they listen to—the moral rules,”* highlighting a general appreciation of sound moral principles.

Motivations for migration to the United States are also connected to differences in work standards between the two countries. Migrants particularly value the professional quality of work, work ethics, and equality of opportunity in the U.S., which they perceive as aligning with their expectations. At the same time, the perceived gap between their own skills and those of Americans is interpreted as a confirmation of their migration motivations. *“I feel that Romanians complain all the time without trying to change anything,”* says Bob, emphasising a difference in mentality between migrants and those who remained in Romania. The decision to migrate thus appears as a natural consequence of the discrepancy between what they aspire to and what they can achieve in their country

of origin. In this regard, Dora remarks: *“We Europeans are much more hard-working than Americans—hundreds of times more hard-working.”*

Another important aspect concerns moral and ethical values in the workplace, often highlighted through contrast with practices in Romania. The theme of corruption—illustrated by the concept of *ciubuc* (bribe)—and the perception of its absence in the United States frequently appear in respondents’ accounts. *“I believe that until corruption is at least somewhat resolved in Romania, nothing can be done,”* states Cicuța, emphasising the importance of a fair and transparent system for personal and professional development. The American experience accentuates this difference: *“The first thing that impressed me was that when you go to the doctor, you don’t have to give, as is customary back home. You know, a bribe. There’s no such thing here, absolutely none—service is service,”* observes Mia.

Ultimately, the importance of institutions and the labour system in generating social change is evident, as is the role of individual qualities in supporting progress. Persistent problems in Romania, such as corruption and bureaucracy, are perceived as major obstacles to development: *“In Romania, you had to wait for your boss to retire or die. America gives you the chance to open your mind”* (Ileana). Respondents also issue a call to action, encouraging active involvement in both community and family life, with determination and integrity, even in the face of resistance and scepticism—particularly from those who remain in Romania.

Migration for these interviewees thus reflects a value transition motivated by the desire for autonomy, fairness, and self-actualisation. Respondents from Romanian communities in the United States stress that meritocratic and transparent systems are preferable to the nepotism and corruption in Romania. They also value honest work, respect, and professional recognition: *“Romanians are good workers”*; *“Education for a career [...] fundamentally shapes the rest of your life”* (Ion). These examples illustrate a change in mentality, where the decision to migrate is influenced by the contrast between individuals’ professional expectations and the realities in Romania. From the perspective of value theories (Ronald Inglehart, Raymond Boudon, Rudolf Rezsohazy, Thomas R. Rochon), it becomes clear that Romanians migrate not only for economic reasons but also to reconstruct their identity and value system within a framework that enables their expression and validation. Migration thus becomes a process of value reconfiguration in which professional experience and work ethics are central to integration and social affirmation.

From the standpoint of migration theories, push–pull theory clarifies the direction and motivation of migration, showing that the absence of fundamental values in the country of origin and their presence in the country of destination create a value asymmetry that favours mobility. Complementarily, Douglas S. Massey’s approach allows for analysis at three levels: at the micro-level, individual decisions reflect the need for financial security and recognition; at the meso-level, Romanian community networks in the U.S. serve as support structures in value adaptation; and at the macro-level, structural differences between Romanian and American socio-professional systems stimulate the reconfiguration of the value system.

Table 2. Push–pull factors and associated values for motivations related to professional fulfilment

Push factors (Romania)	Values (Absent)	Pull factors (USA)	Aspirational values
Corruption and nepotism	Meritocracy, integrity	Transparent systems, professional recognition	Fairness, recognition
Economic instability	Material security	Financial stability, predictability	Well-being, dignified life
Lack of academic opportunities	Self-actualization, competence	Access to advanced education, scholarships	Intellectual development
Bureaucracy, lack of professional mobility	Freedom of action	Opportunities for performance-based advancement	Autonomy, creativity

In summary, the analysis of responses identified corruption, nepotism, the absence of meritocracy, economic instability, and professional barriers in Romania as push factors, associated with the lack of values such as fairness, transparency, and material security. In contrast, the American experience was defined by transparent systems, professional recognition, genuine educational opportunities, and economic predictability — pull factors corresponding to aspirational values such as autonomy, meritocracy, self-actualisation, and integrity. Thus, Romanian migration to the United States is not merely a reaction to economic and institutional constraints but also a process of identity reconstruction, through which values absent in the country of origin are recovered and reinforced in the new context, confirming the interdependence between individual motivations, social structures, and the dynamics of values.

Education and family interests: Supporting education through scholarships, higher education opportunities, and a better life for family and children

A third motivation for migration centres on the value of individual achievement. This motivation integrates and overlaps educational, familial, and linguistic values, which become fundamental both in the migrant’s experience and in the process of integration into American society.

Education as a central value in migration

The interviews analysed highlight the central role of education in both personal development and the strengthening of community cohesion. Education is perceived not only as a means of individual achievement but also as a collective responsibility. In this sense, it is regarded as a form of cultural heritage transmitted from parents to children and from the community to its members. For example, Floarea states: “Our children should be much more independent and have much better opportunities, no matter what they want to do.” This statement reflects the desire to offer the next generation greater opportunities and to open pathways towards personal success.

Furthermore, in the motivations for migration, education is closely linked to both the need for personal fulfilment and family connections. Mia illustrates this connection by

mentioning that her husband “really wanted to leave, he applied for all kinds of study scholarships abroad and received a scholarship to study in America.” In this way, education becomes an essential step not only for a career but also for the integration process into American society.

Respondents also compared the educational systems of Romania and the United States, noting that American education places greater emphasis on developing analytical skills and problem-solving abilities. Costică states: “Romania is the country that educated me. It gave me everything it could, free schooling,” while Cicuța argues that “young people in Romania should, in my opinion, be guided to help as much as they can.” These views indicate that, while Romanian education is perceived as valuable, the opportunities offered by the American system enable a different, more diverse, and more applied form of development.

Education thus emerges as a central value in the migration motivations of Romanians settled in the United States, perceived both as an instrument of individual achievement and as a collective responsibility towards family and community. Statements such as Floarea’s — “Our children should be much more independent and have much better opportunities” — or Mia’s account of obtaining a scholarship to study in America, illustrate that education is understood as a strategic investment in both personal and family futures. Comparisons between the Romanian and U.S. educational systems — such as Costică’s affirmation that “Romania is the country that educated me... free schooling” and Cicuța’s observation on directing young people towards social usefulness — highlight both the appreciation of educational values in the country of origin and the adaptation to American opportunities and standards.

From Ronald Inglehart’s perspective, this orientation reflects a transition from survival values, centred on material security, to self-expression values, such as autonomy and self-actualisation. In Shalom H. Schwartz’s framework, education embodies fundamental motivational values — autonomy, achievement, and benevolence — while, in Raymond Boudon’s interpretation, the decision to migrate represents an expression of axiological rationality, in which choices are guided by values perceived as essential for a dignified life. Rudolf Rezsöházy explains the role of the community in the intergenerational transmission of such values, and Thomas R. Rochon emphasises the transformative function of individuals with high educational capital, who are capable of reshaping collective norms. Thus, education is not only an instrumental factor for integration into American society but also a catalyst for the reconfiguration of the value system, facilitating the transition towards a life model grounded in meritocracy, intellectual freedom, and social responsibility.

Family as a central value

A second fundamental motivation for Romanian migration to the United States is related to family, perceived as a central value. Family not only provides support to those who migrate but also constitutes a key motivational factor in the decision to emigrate. As Ion explains: “It is important to remain legal so that you can later bring your family from

Romania.” Likewise, family represents a space of trust and mutual support, assistance that is directly felt in the migration experience. *“Once I got a job and had an income, I was able to support my family and improve my life here”* (Simion). Statements such as *“I did everything for my children — to give them a life without fear, without compromises”* (Costică) or *“I risked everything so that they would have a chance at a better life”* (Floarea) underscore the sacrifices made to ensure a healthier and fairer environment for children. Gheorghe synthesises this motivation: *“I left to give them a real chance, not just empty promises,”* reflecting both distrust in the Romanian system and hope for a more stable framework abroad.

Participants’ responses reveal a value orientation consistent with Ronald Inglehart’s typology, which distinguishes between survival values and self-expression values. Within this framework, migration appears as a transition from concerns for basic security toward higher aspirations — autonomy, personal development, and securing a better future for one’s children. According to Raymond Boudon’s theory, these individual choices possess axiological rationality: parents are not solely pursuing material advantages but are making migration decisions based on what they consider essential for a dignified life for their children. Thus, the decision to migrate is not purely economic but profoundly ethical and value-driven, shaped by the desire to transmit not only material resources but also a set of principles grounded in freedom, education, and dignity. In Rudolf Rezsohazy’s terms, this process can be understood as the intergenerational transmission of values, in which migration functions as a mechanism for protecting and reinforcing principles regarded as fundamental to family identity and cohesion.

The motivation to migrate in order to support and protect the family, as highlighted in participants’ statements, aligns clearly with Inglehart’s theoretical framework, which explains the transition from survival values — focused on material security and protection — to self-expression values, such as autonomy and personal development. In this context, the family functions as the nucleus of intergenerational values, and the aspiration for a better future for children reflects both the internalisation of these values and their transmission to new generations. From Boudon’s perspective, the choice to migrate to ensure a more stable and equitable environment constitutes an expression of axiological rationality: decisions are based not solely on economic considerations but on principles and convictions regarding a dignified life. In Rezsohazy’s view, the family acts as the primary vector of socialisation, and migration becomes a mechanism through which the group’s fundamental values are protected and perpetuated. According to Thomas R. Rochon, such individual decisions can contribute to the reconfiguration of the collective values of the diaspora, while Shalom H. Schwartz’s model allows for the interpretation of family as a central motivational value at the intersection of tradition preservation and adaptation to new social norms.

Thus, the familial dimension of migration is not merely a reaction to the constraints of the country of origin but also an active process of value reconstruction, in which security, fairness, and dignity become structuring reference points. Understanding family as a central value in the migration process therefore highlights not only the pragmatic dimension of relocation but also its role as a bridge between past and future, between

inherited cultural identity and adaptation to a new social framework — opening the discussion toward how identity-based and cultural motives influence the experience of the Romanian diaspora in the United States.

Language as a link between identity and integration

Closely connected to family, language represents another essential element of migrants' social values, functioning both as a tool for communication within the family and as a symbol of cultural identity. This dual role is emphasised by Constanța, who remarks: *"He speaks Romanian very well, so from the very beginning the idea was that you have to speak Romanian, because you need to understand, to communicate with your grandparents, aunts, uncles, to know what and how."* In Rudolf Rezsohazy's framework, language can be understood as a fundamental vector of intergenerational value transmission, preserving traditions and maintaining a deep emotional connection with the community of origin.

However, in the process of integration into the United States, the English language becomes, for most migrants, an essential necessity. It is not only an instrument for accessing professional opportunities but also a prerequisite for full participation in the social and cultural life of the host country. Floarea describes how her daughter, once she started school, began to use English predominantly and to construct a new identity, distanced from the Romanian language and culture: *"After my daughter went to school, I realised we could never return to the country. She was so ambitious, she wanted to be the best, and she stopped speaking Romanian to us altogether."* From the perspective of Shalom H. Schwartz's model, this process reflects the negotiation between conservation-oriented values (tradition, conformity, cultural security) and openness-to-change values (autonomy, stimulation, self-assertion). Language thus becomes a meeting ground between preserving identity and adapting to the new social context, and the way this transition is managed has direct implications for the reconfiguration of values at both the individual and community levels.

In summary, educational and family values decisively influence both the decision to emigrate and the process of adaptation to the new environment. Education, as the first step in individual and professional development, is a crucial factor in the migration of Romanians to America. Family plays an essential role in supporting migrants and maintaining cultural traditions, while language simultaneously functions as a symbol of identity and as a vital instrument of integration. These values, interconnected and dynamic, reflect not only the desire for personal fulfilment and professional success but also the capacity to adapt to the social and cultural conditions of the United States.

The interpretation of these accounts can be approached through the lens of social value theories. According to Ronald Inglehart, Romanians exemplify the transition from survival values to self-expression values, in which the desire for education, freedom, and personal recognition becomes a priority. Raymond Boudon emphasises that the hierarchy of values varies depending on the individual context — for some, professional achievement is paramount, while for others, family security takes precedence. From Rezsohazy's perspective, modern values such as mobility and autonomy coexist with traditional values

such as care for children and the preservation of cultural identity. In Thomas R. Rochon's logic, emerging values in the diaspora are linked to adaptation, courage, and integration into a new culture.

Romanian migration to the United States underscores the role of language as an essential social value, both in preserving cultural identity and in facilitating socio-economic integration. In participants' narratives, Romanian is presented as a symbol of family cohesion and continuity of traditions, while English is perceived as an indispensable tool for professional success and adaptation to the American environment. This dual function fits within Shalom H. Schwartz's theoretical framework, which distinguishes between conservation values (maintaining the mother tongue as an expression of belonging) and self-enhancement values (acquiring language competence for social mobility). From Inglehart's perspective, the shift toward predominant use of English, particularly among younger generations, reflects the transition from traditional survival values to self-expression values. Furthermore, Rezsohazy notes that this linguistic change is shaped by the collective dynamics of the community and the institutional pressures of the host society, while Rochon highlights the role of community leaders in maintaining and transmitting the mother tongue across generations. The linguistic experience of Romanian migrants therefore illustrates a complex process of value negotiation, in which identity is both preserved and reshaped under the influence of the new social context.

Values such as education and self-actualisation, emphasised by respondents, confirm the observations of the OECD (2019), which indicate that these dimensions are more pronounced in the motivations of Romanians who choose to emigrate to North America. The essential difference between Romanian migration to America and to Europe lies in the educational profile of migrants: over 50% of Romanians settled in the United States and nearly 80% of those in Canada have higher education, in contrast with European destinations such as Italy or Spain, where the educational level is considerably lower. This distinction suggests that, in the North American context, the values of education and self-actualisation are not merely aspirations but concrete investments in personal and professional development.

An analysis of participants' responses, through the lens of migration theories (Table 3), highlights that migration to the United States is shaped by the interaction between push factors in Romania and pull factors in the United States, reflecting a significant value transition. Domestically, respondents identify as decisive reasons for leaving: economic instability, lack of meritocracy, institutional corruption, insufficient quality of the educational system, and uncertainty about their children's future. These deficiencies are associated with the absence of fundamental values such as family security, fairness, transparency, social mobility, and merit-based professional recognition. In contrast, the American experience is characterised by diverse educational opportunities, a meritocratic professional environment, a functional institutional framework, and clear prospects for material prosperity and personal autonomy. This contrast confirms the assumptions of push-pull theory, whereby structural deficiencies in the country-of-origin act as repelling factors, while perceived advantages in the host country function as attracting factors.

Table 3. Push–pull factors and associated values for motivations in the category of education and family interests

Push factors (Romania)	Values (Absent)	Pull factors (USA)	Aspirational values
Uncertainty about children's future	Family security, stability	Safe environment for raising and educating children	Family protection, emotional stability
Educational system perceived as insufficiently effective	Educational quality, personal development	Diverse and applied educational opportunities	Quality education, intellectual autonomy
Economic instability and low incomes	Financial security, predictability	Better professional and salary opportunities	Prosperity, financial independence
Lack of meritocracy and institutional corruption	Fairness, transparency, professional recognition	Meritocratic and transparent system	Performance-based recognition, social justice
Distrust in institutions and weak social infrastructure	Social trust, fair public services	Efficient institutions and functional public services	Respect for rules, institutional trust
Limited career opportunities for young people	Social mobility, valuing competences	Possibility of professional advancement based on merit	Social mobility, self-actualization

Therefore, migration is not merely an economic or pragmatic act, but emerges as a complex experience of self-affirmation, adaptation, and value negotiation. Personal and cultural values profoundly influence both the decision to leave and the process by which individuals reconstruct their identity in the diaspora, offering an essential perspective for understanding the human dimension of migration. Thus, the decision to migrate reflects a fusion between the continuity of traditional values and the embrace of modern ideals, balancing identity roots with aspirations toward a more dignified and freer life.

Political and/or social situation: Consequences of the communist regime

In addition to economic factors, some respondents also cited political motives. The accounts of Smaranda and Nenea bring to the forefront experiences lived under oppressive regimes, marked by fear and by the absence of genuine change after the fall of communism. For them, migration represented more than a reaction to terror — it was an affirmation of personal values: freedom, justice, and dignity. Thus, the motivation to migrate does not derive exclusively from material constraints but from a profound tension between individual values and those promoted by the society of origin. The desire to live in a society that values competence and freedom becomes a clear expression of a value rupture between the individual and the Romanian political context.

Their testimonies are telling: “We knew they would take our houses, our land, our money, but we didn’t believe it... Communism came, and it was worse than the war” (Smaranda); “I wanted to live in a free country, not having to look over my shoulder when I spoke” (Nenea). Such historical experiences had a traumatic impact on the perception of fundamental values such as freedom, security, and the right to property, decisively influencing the decision to migrate. Floarea recalls: “We fled during Ceaușescu’s time because of the terror,” while Cicuța evokes the daily shortages: “When I left, there was

communism in the country, so there was nothing on the shelves. You could barely get bread at noon."

This distrust in the Romanian state's ability to ensure stability did not fade after the collapse of the communist regime. The interviews reveal that, regardless of the time of departure — whether before or after 1990 — many respondents continue to perceive Romania as a space where structural limitations persist: *"After the Revolution, I hoped. But things went from bad to worse. Corruption was greater, and the chances to do something clean were almost nil"* (Nenea). Moreover, real opportunities are perceived as limited. As a result, the decision to settle permanently in the United States became not only a pragmatic option but also one grounded in the conviction that only in another social context could they achieve personal security (*"I wanted to escape from that system where you had no right to be human"* – Floarea) and the professional recognition they desired (*"I wanted to get to a place where my work mattered and I would be respected for what I do"* – Bob). Costică expresses this openness to change and the transmission of values to future generations: *"I did everything for my children — to give them a life without fear, without compromises."*

A key element linking all these dimensions is the need for personal security — material, physical, and emotional. Simion summarises this perspective in a straightforward manner: *"If you don't have security, you can't have an economic situation; so, practically, from my point of view, security is primary."* In this sense, security is not merely a condition of daily life but a fundamental value that serves as the foundation for building a stable and dignified existence.

Moreover, this need for security extends beyond the individual, integrating into activities of solidarity and collective responsibility, conceived as means of protection and affirmation. Donations to churches, mutual support, and belonging to a migrant community contribute to creating a space of "peace" and personal meaning, as Floarea affirms: *"In our community we found peace... we found our way."* Thus, migration is not only a response to shortages but also a value-driven strategy for reconstructing identity and reaffirming dignity in a new social context.

From the perspective of social value theories, these findings align with Raymond Boudon's view, which interprets individual decisions as rational-axiological, in the sense that they confirm or challenge the dominant values of the environment of origin. In Shalom H. Schwartz's terms, the values identified — autonomy, security, personal achievement — act as essential motivational guides. Likewise, the transition from survival values to self-expression values, as explained by Ronald Inglehart, is visible in respondents' narratives, while the role of community leaders and the diaspora as agents of value change corresponds to Thomas R. Rochon's hypothesis. According to Rudolf Rezsöházy, the consolidation of these values is possible only in a favourable collective context, such as the Romanian community in the United States. Overall, migration appears as a mechanism through which individuals redefine their identity and value system, moving beyond economic constraints and building a socio-cultural environment that enables the long-term cultivation of freedom, meritocracy, and family protection.

Table 4. Push–pull factors and associated values for motivations in the category of political and/or social situation

Push factors (Romania)	Values (Absent)	Pull factors (USA)	Aspirational values
Repression under the communist regime (<i>“you had no right to be human”</i>), constant fear (<i>“not looking over your shoulder”</i>), lack of legal security	Freedom, dignity, personal security	Freedom of expression, respect for individual rights	Freedom, autonomy, legal protection
Severe material shortages (<i>“nothing on the shelves”</i>), corruption, nepotism, unrecognised merit	Meritocracy, economic stability, fairness	Genuine economic opportunities, professional recognition, competitive salaries	Meritocracy, financial stability, professional fairness
Limited access to scholarships, rigid system, low emphasis on critical thinking	Quality education, personal development	Access to higher education, scholarships, ongoing professional training	Self-actualisation, academic excellence
Difficulty providing children with a secure future, lack of trust in Romanian institutions	Family protection, child safety	Possibility of family reunification, stable environment for children	Family security, community cohesion
Gradual loss of traditions in an unstable domestic context	Preservation of cultural identity, language transmission	Possibility of maintaining the Romanian language in the family and community	Cultural continuity, hybrid identity

At the same time, respondents’ testimonies highlight a set of push factors, such as repression under the communist regime (*“you had no right to be human”*), corruption and nepotism (*“after the Revolution... corruption was greater”*), material shortages (*“there was nothing on the shelves”*), and limited professional opportunities (*“you had to wait for your boss to retire”*). In parallel, the pull factors identified include freedom of expression, access to a competitive educational system (*“I received a scholarship to study in America”*), professional merit recognition (*“if they see you are hardworking, they trust you”*), and family security (*“I did everything for my children”*).

Interpreted through the lens of the push–pull model and Douglas S. Massey’s cumulative migration theory, these responses indicate that the prior experiences of other migrants, combined with the existence of diaspora networks, have reduced the costs and uncertainty of departure, thereby reinforcing individual motivations. Migration to the United States, in this context, can be understood as a process in which the structural pressures of Romania (push factors) and the systemic opportunities of the United States (pull factors) interact with a “value transfer” facilitated by social networks, generating mobility that is simultaneously economic, social, and axiological.

The motivations expressed by participants reveal that economic, professional, educational, and political factors, while interrelated, articulate distinct dimensions of the migration experience. Economic factors are primarily linked to the search for material

stability, predictability, and the fair reward of effort, reflecting a transition from survival values to aspirations of well-being and dignity. Professional factors highlight the pursuit of recognition, autonomy, and meritocracy, underscoring dissatisfaction with nepotism and corruption in Romania and the preference for transparent and performance-based systems in the United States. Educational factors are associated with intergenerational investments and self-actualisation, as respondents perceive education not only as a tool for individual advancement but also as a legacy for children and a guarantee of mobility and social responsibility. Political factors, finally, derive from both the traumatic experiences of the communist regime and the persistent dysfunctions of the post-communist state, shaping migration as an act of value rupture and reaffirmation of freedom, justice, and dignity. Together, these factors delineate a spectrum of motivations in which each domain plays a specific role: the economy provides material foundations, professional life offers recognition, education ensures continuity and future prospects, while politics frames the broader struggle for rights and freedoms.

In summary, migration motivations can be interpreted as expressions of a set of social values. The aspiration for a better life — articulated through the need for financial stability, professional development, political freedom, and family fulfilment — emerges as a constant driver of mobility. This value typology is not specific solely to the communist or post-communist periods but is also found in interwar Romanian migration, documented by sociologists such as Galitzi and Negrea, highlighting the continuity of these aspirations over time.

Conclusion

A comparative examination of social values reveals a complex dynamic of preservation, transformation, and negotiation, in which the transnational experience reconfigures respondents' priorities. Family remains a central point of reference, yet the modalities of support change with access to financial stability and the resources offered by the American context, generating an ongoing negotiation between professional demands and time dedicated to close relationships. Work continues to serve as a means of personal fulfilment, but perceptions of it shift significantly in the United States, where it is rewarded and valued, leading to new balances between professional and personal life. Education retains its status as a major value, reinforced by the additional opportunities and resources available in the United States, prompting a reassessment of the relationship between theory and practice. Meritocracy, long aspired to in Romania but rarely experienced, becomes a tangible reality in the American environment; nevertheless, success and fairness are reinterpreted according to context. Stability and visions of the future, although desired prior to migration, materialise through professional and economic integration, yet are accompanied by dilemmas concerning belonging and the possibility of return. Religion and faith may remain identity anchors, though forms of expression adapt in response to the secularism of the host society. Finally, cultural identity is preserved through language, traditions, and gastronomy, but is constantly renegotiated between maintaining

“Romanian-ness” and adapting to the American space, reflecting a continuous process of self-reconstruction in the context of migration.

The perspective of the research participants suggests that the decision to migrate is, in essence, a value-based choice, expressing not only dissatisfaction with conditions in Romania but also personal aspirations related to identity, respect, and freedom. This transformation is theoretically supported by Raymond Boudon, who interprets migration as a rational choice shaped by expectations of self-actualisation. Similarly, Thomas R. Rochon argues that new cultural contexts foster the emergence of novel values. Temporary economic migration among Romanians thus represents not merely a response to structural inequalities in the post-communist period, but also an intense process of social and community reconstruction, in which the decision to leave is shaped by expectations for a “better life” and access to resources valued both individually and collectively (Sandu, 2006; Sandu, Toth, & Tudor, 2018). In this sense, migration functions not only as a reaction to an inadequate reality but also as a process of self-reconstruction aligned with a new system of values.

This analysis further supports the argument that migration goals vary significantly according to destination, reflecting contrasts between functional–economic motivations, typical of Europe, and aspirational–identity-based motivations, characteristic of migration to North America. Romanian migration to Western Europe, particularly to countries such as Italy and Spain, has been driven predominantly by the desire for rapid material gains and the support of families remaining at home, corresponding to a model of temporary economic circulation (Sandu, 2006). By contrast, values such as education and self-actualisation, frequently emphasised by respondents in qualitative research, corroborate the observations made by the OECD (2019), which indicate that these dimensions are more prominent among Romanians who choose to migrate to the North American space. The key difference between Romanian migration to North America and to Europe lies in the educational profile of migrants: over 50% of Romanians settled in the United States and nearly 80% of those in Canada possess higher education qualifications, in contrast to European destinations where this indicator is considerably lower. This discrepancy reflects not only variations in immigration policies and socio-economic contexts, but also a significant value gap between the two migration types. While Europe is perceived as a pragmatic option oriented toward economic survival, America is associated with a project of identity reconstruction, in which education and professional development become deliberate and active investments. Thus, aspirational values are not merely abstract ideals but internalised elements that guide migration decisions and the trajectory of integration. Consequently, the analysis of Romanian migration goals reveals an essential distinction between instrumental migration, dominated by immediate needs, and value-driven migration, in which individuals seek an environment that supports fairness, meritocracy, and self-actualisation — a distinction that influences both the adaptation process and the type of human capital exported.

In conclusion, the migration characteristic of the study participants does not represent merely a geographical relocation but a profound process of transformation and value adaptation. It reflects a dynamic of social values in which individuals seek to

harmonise their lives with their own convictions regarding freedom, recognition, well-being, and dignity. Thus, the decision to migrate becomes a clear expression of the tension between internalised values and the social conditions of the country of origin, as well as the desire to live in an environment that fosters self-actualisation, meritocracy, and social justice.

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