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Two-Speed Integration? A Comparative Analysis of Barriers and Resilience Strategies of Young Migrants in Vulnerable Conditions in Romania

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Abstract: This comparative study focuses on the barriers to social and economic inclusion, as well as the integration and coping strategies of Arab and Moldovan migrants in Romania. We explored the integration barriers they face, the main individual and societal aspects that lead to their resilience, and their self-perception of vulnerability, by carrying out 35 psychosocial interviews and four focus groups with young migrants (aged 18 to 29), belonging to the two different subgroups (of Arab and Moldovan origins, respectively). The comparative analysis revealed that migrants from Arab countries face harsher integration barriers compared to Moldovan migrants, they have a more severe self-perceived vulnerability, and their integration may be a longer and more complex process. Results showed that mastery of the language and the network of acquaintances play an indispensable role in inclusion. Moldovans integrate more easily than Arabs, thanks to their fluency in Romanian, the native language shared with the majority local population, the geographical and cultural proximity to the country of destination, and the larger personal network. We highlight the need for improving integration policies for young migrants, tailoring them to the specific problems and barriers that migrants are facing.

Keywords: migration; integration strategies; social inclusion; barriers to integration; resilience



Citation: Cimpoeru, Smaranda, Monica Roman, Vlad I. Roșca, Elena-Maria Prada, Ioana Manafi, and Laura Mureșan. 2023. Two-Speed Integration? A Comparative Analysis of Barriers and Resilience Strategies of Young Migrants in Vulnerable Conditions in Romania. *Social Sciences* 12: 84. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020084>

Academic Editors: Cristina Giuliani, Camillo Regalia, Birte Nienaber and Amalia Gilodi

Received: 14 December 2022

Revised: 1 February 2023

Accepted: 2 February 2023

Published: 7 February 2023



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1. Introduction

Although it mainly remains a country of emigration, with approximately 6 million Romanians currently living abroad (Ministry of Interior Affairs, quoted by [Euronews 2022](#)), over recent years, Romania has also started to attract more and more incoming migrants, EU citizens, or third-country nationals. Labor migration, educational migration, family reunification, and asylum seeking are among the most common reasons of migration to Romania. Mid-2020, there were 705,000 migrants living in Romania, including 285,000 from the Republic of Moldova, contributing to a total resident population of 19 million ([Migration Policy Institute 2020](#)).

Due to the rather small size of international migration to Romania, [Popescu and Toth \(2011\)](#) considered incoming migrants to form a “silent community”. Such shadowing of international migration to Romania has also meant that rather few studies have been dedicated to incoming migrants and their vulnerabilities, coping strategies, or resilience strategies. The present paper aims to fill this research gap by analyzing migrants’ barriers toward integration, their resilience strategies, and the self-perceptions of vulnerability.

The comparative analysis sets to explore similarities and differences in integration barriers and resilience strategies between Moldovan and Arab youth in vulnerable conditions who migrated to Romania. The two groups were chosen because they constitute the largest migration flows to Romania, while also being two contrasting cases in terms of their characteristics and migration history in Romania. More than half of the foreign-born Romanians are from the neighboring Republic of Moldova, a former part of the Romanian Principality of Moldavia. As a consequence, a large number of them are eligible for Romanian citizenship based on their descent. Being a part of the former Soviet Union, migration between Moldova and Romania was forbidden before the fall of the Iron Curtain, but exploded in the late 1990s. On the other hand, migration from MENA countries into Romania dates back to the socialist era, when Romania was a predilect choice for Arab students (Iacob 2022) who later settled in Romania and created an Arab community (F. Matei 2007). After the 1990s, the voluntary migration was complemented by a forced one, with asylum seekers mainly coming from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran.

At a first glance, access to Romanian citizenship is equally open to both groups. As stipulated in the Citizenship Law (1991), a stateless person or a foreign citizen who requests citizenship must meet some specific requirements: the applicant is residing in Romania at the time of application, has been in Romania legally for at least 8 years (maybe with a temporary residency permit), or is married to and has lived with a citizen of Romania for at least 5 years as of the date of the marriage; additionally, the applicant demonstrates strong moral character by acts and attitudes, exhibits loyalty to the Romanian government, and refrains from engaging in or encouraging any criminal activity or activity that could endanger the country's security. However, any citizen of the Republic of Moldova has the right to reacquire Romanian citizenship based on relatives (parents, grandparents, great-grandparents), born on the territory of the Kingdom of Romania until 28 June 1940, date of the Soviet occupation in the historical region of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. Romanian citizenship is reacquired by Moldovans according to Article 11 of the Citizenship Law. As a consequence, about one-quarter of Moldovan citizens (more than 640,000 persons) have double citizenships: Moldovan and Romanian (Necșuțu 2021).

Therefore, the overarching research question probes the differences and similarities between Moldovan and Arab migrant youth in vulnerable conditions when it comes to their integration in Romania? To this end, the analysis is set around two main ideas: integration barriers and resilience strategies, unfolding in different subsets. Our research hypothesis is that the initial migration context (at origin and at destination) and migrants' individual characteristics (such as education or family background) shape their integration barriers and resilience strategies. We primarily aim to investigate the integration barriers in the two cases and their resilience strategies; subsequently, we provide a comparative analysis of the two groups. We expect to find some potential different barriers faced between the two groups and different resilience strategies, as well as some similarities. Additionally, we investigate the potential effects of such differences on the dynamics of migrants' integration process and on their perceived vulnerability.

The study, employing a qualitative approach, was conducted as part of a larger project on the integration of young migrants, *Empowerment through Liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in Vulnerable Conditions* (MIMY), funded by the European Union.

The focus is set on the barriers toward integration that migrants encounter in the host society and the resilience strategies that they develop in Romania in order to overcome such barriers. As these barriers and strategies are strongly influenced by age and by the country of origin, our study focuses on young migrants (aged 18 to 29) from the Republic of Moldova and from Arab countries. An additional selection criterion evolves around the concept of vulnerability; *a priori*, we aim to analyze young individuals in vulnerable conditions. While employing the concept of structural vulnerability (Watts and Bohle 1993), we consider several tentative vulnerability criteria, related to economic situation, health condition, housing, and family context. We search for young participants with low income or who are unemployed, living in precarious conditions, or lacking a family. However, we

do not intend to define the concept of vulnerability. In this paper, vulnerability is regarded as a subjective concept, as we explore individuals' own perceptions and assessments on how vulnerable they are.

This paper conceptualizes migrant integration through a multidimensional approach. There is no general consensus on a definition or model of integration. We embrace the popular, normative approach proposed by [Ager and Strang \(2008, p. 177\)](#), which explores the connection between the "principles of citizenship and rights [. . .], and public outcomes in sectors such as employment, housing, education, and health". Integration and, consequently, integration barriers are assessed in this frame. We also ascertain the existence of different models of integration depending on the specifics of the host countries, as proposed by [Dikici \(2022\)](#). As such, our analysis focuses on migrant integration according to the characteristics of the Romanian host society.

Given the various definitions of resilience, a versatile concept, we follow the one proposed by [Wu et al. \(2018\)](#), according to whom the resilience process refers to a good adaptation to a situation, despite exposure to severe risk and adversity. When social science discusses resilience in the context of migration, it is concerned with the quality of life and the overall wellbeing of an individual's physical and mental health.

This paper may be included in the new, emerging strand of the literature on migration to Eastern Europe. It has some clear contributions to the body of evidence, from applied and theoretical perspectives. Firstly, it takes a first look at the integration of migrants from Arab countries in Romania and reveals first insights into this specific case. Secondly, we provide a first comparative analysis of the two different groups of young migrants (in Romania), and we highlight their barriers to integration and resilience strategies. Lastly, we prove that different migrants' characteristics and contexts shape the integration process, which has specific features for each group. Here, we embrace the approach of [Skrobanek et al. \(2020\)](#), who consider that one needs to account for the dynamicity, fluidity, and contingency of integration processes. Relying on a comparative approach, we highlight that the dynamic integration process is shaped by the characteristics of different migrant groups.

In our specific case, the results show that integration may be faster and smoother in the case of Moldovan migrants, compared to the Arab ones, suggesting the existence of a "two-speed" integration process.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 is a literature review on migrant vulnerability and integration, while Section 3 presents the materials and methods used for data collection and analysis; Section 4 presents the results of our analysis, highlighting barriers and resilience strategies, followed by the discussion section; lastly, Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Literature Review

Even if of reduced dimensions, migration to Romania has nevertheless received some attention in the scientific literature in recent years, mainly after the refugee crisis of 2015 ([Miholjic 2019](#); [Prada 2021](#); [Roman et al. 2018](#)). As a consequence of that crisis, the Romanian Ministry for Labor has constantly supplemented the annual quota of third-country nationals allowed onto the domestic labor market, from 5500 in 2015 to 100,000 in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Under such developments, with more and more incoming workers, but also students, researchers have also turned their attention to the issue of migration to Romania. Another reason why international incoming migration started to receive increasing scientific attention was caused by the demographic aging phenomenon in Romania; in July 2022, the elderly population (aged 65+) exceeded the young population (aged 0–14) by more than 0.67 million people ([INSSE 2022](#)). In such conditions, migration is seen as an opportunity to slow down structural imbalances.

In spite of this opportunity, recent research highlights the rather complicated aspects of migrant integration in Romania. [Grassi \(2021\)](#) shows that the first public authority entities to deal with the integration of migrants were established in 1996 and 1999, and then merged into the General Inspectorate for Immigration (IGI) after the country's adherence

to the European Union in January 2007. Since Romania has a rather limited experience compared to other countries in what concerns migrant integration policies, Grassi claims that much of the efforts for facilitating the inclusion of migrants are made by NGOs such as the National Romanian Council for Refugees (CNRR) or the Ecumenical Association of Churches, oftentimes exceeding the contribution of public bodies. Such organizations develop programs for supporting migrants in vulnerable conditions, including refugees or accompanied minors, people in transit, foreign students, or workers (Cliza and Ulariu 2022; Nicolescu 2019). As migrants' needs are individually specific, their vulnerability is triggered by a variety of factors and situations, as identified in the most recent scientific evidence.

The concept of vulnerability has recently received increased attention in migration studies (Bates-Eamer 2019; Hoefinger et al. 2019). Vulnerability is strongly linked to the idea of social inequality (Cillo 2021; Cukut Krilić 2022), which also paves the way to the notion of structural vulnerability: a condition of individuals or groups of people who are exposed to risk due to the existence of economic, social, cultural, political, etc. hierarchies (Bourgois et al. 2017). The International Organization of Migration defines vulnerable migrants as "persons who are unable effectively to enjoy their human rights, are at increased risk of violations and abuse, and who, accordingly, are entitled to call on a duty bearer's heightened duty of care" (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d., p. 5).

Because migrants many times find themselves in irregular situations (i.e., unemployed, no proper housing conditions, poor social connections etc.), they are also often vulnerable (Boinnard 2020; Nguyen and Pattanasri 2022). Closely linked to vulnerability is the concept of resilience. This describes the capacity of migrants to absorb shocks (such as the acculturation stress) and integrate in society (Caqueo-Urizar et al. 2021). Resilience can be described as the capacity of migrants to resist adversity and, with the help of coping strategies that migrants develop, to achieve integration. Due to this reason, research on migrant resilience has a transdisciplinary character, building upon a large area of topics. Adger et al. (2002) understood resilience as the capacity of migrants to absorb shocks and deal with social situations that might occur. In migration, resilience often develops as a patterned adjustment to specific situations, which is in line with Skrobanek et al.'s (2020) idea of liquid integration, according to which the resilience and integration of migrants occur at different paces based on dynamicity and fluidity.

A particular category susceptible for vulnerability belongs to the young migrants. Youth vulnerability and, subsequently, youth resilience occur through interactions with the family, with the school, with other social factors, etc. (Danga et al. 2022). Children tend to be more at risk than adults because the migration circumstances amplify their deficits or weaknesses more than in the case of grownups, who can claim to have achieved more stability in life (Zyngier 2017). Once young people start their migration journey (by themselves or by accompanying their families), their exposure to societal components tends to be greater than with adults. Young migrants lack some integration mechanisms that elder migrants benefit from mainly thanks to their age. While, for example, labor integration can represent a resilience mechanism for grownups, children who do not yet fulfill the age requirements for being able to work lack this option.

Such vulnerabilities include the risk of marginalization and social exclusion of migrant populations (Mendola and Pera 2022). One particularly vulnerable geographical group consists of migrant youth from the Middle East (Shields and Lujan 2018). Middle Eastern migrants were acknowledged by Cimpoeru et al. (2020) as particularly vulnerable in Romania.

Their precarity is determined by the refugee status that many Middle Eastern youth hold in their migratory journey. Refugees and other forced migrants are considered in yjr literature as being predominantly vulnerable (Borsch et al. 2019; Garcia-Moris et al. 2021). As opposed to Arab youth from the Middle East, Moldovans represent a geographical category of migrants understood as less vulnerable in Romania. The common language, a common past, and a vast borderline of 680 km, as well as higher educational and labor opportunities, are factors that favor the migration of Moldovans to Romania and tend

to lower their vulnerability (Stoleriu et al. 2011). However, as our research results show, despite such cultural similarities, even Moldovan youth migrants face serious resilience challenges. Their integration difficulties can be discussed in line with the findings of Adida (2014), who observed that migrants from cultures which are similar to the host culture are, actually, more at risk. Adida believes that the similarity between the home culture and the host culture makes migrants remain “in between”, retaining strong ties with the home society and not making enough effort to integrate into the new society. Adida also observed that many such migrants actually try to preserve this intermediary status (as it can prove beneficial in the home society), thus making assimilation more difficult.

The results emphasize various attempts to formally explain the concept of vulnerability and integration. In a novel research strategy, our study adopts a flexible approach in conceptualizing vulnerability and gives migrants in Romania a voice to explain their own perceptions on vulnerability. In this respect, recent findings on transnationalism prove to be valuable, as they show that migrants maintain a balancing connection between the home and the host society in order to improve and access their integration opportunities in the latter (Şimşek 2019). Transnationalism has been a dominant paradigm within the migration literature in recent years, with important contributions to the idea of liquid integration or flexible integration, as its governing idea claims that there is an ongoing set of exchanges and contacts maintained by migrants between their home and host societies, and that such cross-border practices ultimately define the entire migration experience (Croitoru et al. 2014; Recchi et al. 2016; Tedeschi et al. 2022).

3. Materials and Methods

When researching human vulnerability, qualitative methods and interviews, in particular, are extensively important to ascertain the perceptions and the experiences of migrants (Robertshaw et al. 2017; Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz 2018). This study employed two qualitative methods: focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Both were designed to examine subjective responses from people who experienced a particular situation in life (Ennis and Chen 2012), and each method was purposively used in order to address different aspects of the research topic. We used the focus group method as a valuable tool for our qualitative research to explore the perspectives and experiences of young migrants in vulnerable conditions living in Romania (Cox et al. 1976). The focus group method was a cost-effective way to collect data from a large number of participants and identify patterns and trends that might not occur in individual interviews (Rabiee 2004; Nyumba et al. 2018). Additionally, it allowed us to observe the interactions and dynamics between the migrants, which can provide valuable insights such as “joking, arguing, teasing, and recapturing past events”, as well as reveal valuable perspectives into group dynamics and social norms (Liamputtong 2011, p. 6). As for semi-structured interviews, we find that this method has benefits such as a high degree of flexibility, allowing us to collect in-depth data and follow-up on questions that arise. It also provides us with a level of standardization, allowing us to compare data from different young migrants (Ennis and Chen 2012).

Our study was conducted among young migrants (aged 18 to 29) of Arab and Moldovan origins in Romania and included 35 semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions. Due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying participants for the study was difficult. To overcome these challenges, we used the snowball sampling method, which relied on initial participants to recruit others from their networks to participate in the study. As the COVID-19 pandemic restricted the mobility of the research team, the interviews were carried out online using the Zoom application. Nevertheless, a positive aspect of the pandemic was that the online interviewing enhanced the confidence of participants and helped them feel more comfortable during the discussions, particularly when turning on their video cameras. The interviews were conducted in two different sites: Bucharest and Iaşi, two of the largest cities in Romania.

In the first stage, the interviews were recorded between January 2020 and November 2021, while the focus groups were carried out in April and May 2021. Both the focus

group framework and the semi-structured interviews were developed within the MIMY project with the Italian team from Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC). The interview tools included open-ended questions to identify the vulnerabilities and vulnerable experiences of the participants. The main topics were related to vulnerability and resilience, considering aspects such as the family, quality of family relationships and perceived support, external conditions and family influence, family expectations, educational experience, perceived importance of education, relationship with the labor market, the patrimonial/financial/housing condition, the social and intergroup relationships, and future perspectives.

For the focus group discussions, the research team was supported by young Moldovan and Arab migrants, involved as peer researchers, who participated as observers, but also asked additional questions outside the interview grid and provided translation support. All participants were informed about their time commitment to the interview and were asked to sign an informed consent that contained all aspects of the research in which they were involved.

In the case of Moldovan migrants, data were collected in two focus groups, one with five participants residing in Iași and the other with six participants residing in Bucharest, as well as in 15 semi-structured interviews with seven males and eight females. The selection of the sample was made by considering several criteria related to structural vulnerability, such as economic vulnerability (e.g., being a beneficiary of social assistance), social vulnerability (e.g., living alone, being far from family or without family, or having health issues). More details about the samples can be found in Tables A1 and A2. All the discussions for both focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted in Romanian. No gender differences occurred between Moldovan participants at the focus group interviews.

For the subgroup of Arab respondents, the identification of participants was also a challenge, because the pandemic-induced restrictions made the access to various NGOs or institutions dealing with Arab migrants more difficult. Additionally, behavioral gender differences could be observed. Men were more reluctant to share their experiences than women; thus, it was also difficult to find males willing to participate. Our study included two focus group interviews separated by gender and 20 semi-structured interviews (nine males and 11 females). The focus group interviews were conducted online with the help of peer researchers, who also acted as translators, because not all participants spoke an alternative language (English, French, or Romanian). For all focus group meetings, we additionally developed a PowerPoint presentation that highlighted the main topics addressed (such as family, work, education, and social life). The presentation was shared with the participants as a moderation instrument to facilitate group interactions. The discussions among the participants were open and polite; all participants were eager to share their experiences. At the same time, participants perceived the focus group discussion as a method of socialization, especially in the context of the COVID-19 restrictions on social interactions.

In the case of the semi-structured interviews, various methods of data collection were used depending on the requests of each participant. Most of the interviews were conducted online, but some were also face-to-face or through telephone. In the online interviews, not all participants were willing to open their cameras. The female respondents were more concerned about aspects related to their privacy. One female respondent refused to be recorded and, thus, notes were taken on paper. Another used a pseudonym, being afraid to reveal her true identity. The interviews were recorded in different languages depending on each participant's communication preferences, so as to encourage them to feel comfortable enough to express themselves freely. Most interviewees opted for English, one participant preferred to be interviewed in French, while some others, who had acquired destination-language proficiency, preferred the interview to be in Romanian. Despite all these difficulties, the interactions of the Arab participants with the researchers

were generally open and trustful, with trust being the key to their openness in both online and in-person interviews.

Even if responses of Arab and Moldovan interviewees overlap, we present the findings separately because it allows a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the unique experiences and perspectives of each group. The cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts in which different groups live may vary, even though their responses may be similar. Additionally, it allows a more accurate representation of the data and minimizes the chance of incorrectly generalizing findings to all immigrants.

In order to ensure confidentiality and protect the identity of the participants, a coding system was used that is also employed in this paper. The names of the participants were replaced by a code consisting of five elements, e.g., [MY8_Bucharest_f_A], where "MY" stands for "migrant youth", "8" denotes the chronological sequence when the interview occurred, "Bucharest" is the place of residence in the host country at the moment of the interview, "f" or "m" is the interviewee's gender, female or male, and "A" or "M" indicates Arab origin or Moldovan origin, respectively. In the case of the focus groups, the participants were coded by the number of the focus group (FG1 to FG4), followed by the respondent's gender and the country of origin.

4. Results

This section presents the main findings resulting from the interviews and focus groups conducted with young migrants from Arab countries and from the Republic of Moldova. The section is structured according to the research hypotheses. First, we refer to the integration barriers, organized in five subsections, according to the definition of [Ager and Strang \(2008\)](#), which is also in line with participants' perception on integration. We then introduce the resilience strategies developed by our participants, mirroring the categories used for presenting the barriers. At the end of the section, we reflect on migrants' self-perceived vulnerability, since this vulnerability is an important determinant of both the difficulties they face and the resilience strategies adopted in their integration process.

4.1. Barriers to Integration

The challenges reported by young migrants are mostly related to legal barriers, difficulties in communicating with local authorities, insufficient access to all the necessary information regarding their migrant status, and their different rights, as students, compared to locals. Language issues have also been a common topic, although more disturbing for Arab immigrants than for Moldovans. Labor market access and financial issues have also been reported to cause adaptation difficulties.

Young migrant women from Arab countries in particular mentioned social isolation and the lack of social life as barriers to integration. Discrimination incidents were considered to be isolated, although many of them may have been rooted in preconceptions of the local population. On the basis of the main topics identified from the focus groups and interviews, integration barriers were grouped into five categories: barriers at the individual level; barriers related to learning the language; barriers determined by providers of local services and access to education; barriers concerning the access to the labor market and the economic situation; barriers referring to the contact with the local population. Below, we elaborate on each of them.

4.1.1. Barriers Related to Individual Aspects and Psychological Trauma

At the individual level, young migrants coming from countries affected by war reported the trauma and depression associated with the life they were forced to leave behind. Participants described feeling distressed and overwhelmed when coming to a new country, where they did not know anybody, whom to trust, and how things worked, being forced to start a new life. They felt lost, confused, alone, and helpless, feeling that the entire situation was unfair.

“I would constantly be obsessed with the fact that my life was perfect in Syria. Because in Syria I had ballet school, I had piano school, I had swimming school, I had French club. [. . .] Here I had nothing to do [nothing of that]. That made me so mad, I can’t do anything about it. Why? Just tell me why is this happening to me? That’s when I really felt I couldn’t do anything. But that’s life, it’s unfair.” (MY3_RO_Bucharest_f_A)

The psychological trauma experienced by those leaving their home countries because of military conflicts was an important individual aspect that hindered integration into the host society, whereby respondents were forced to leave their lives behind and start everything anew. Interviewees from Syria confessed they would always be scared and they would never stop worrying about the members of their families who remained back home. The lack of friends and social connections in the host country enhanced this psychological vulnerability and the feeling of isolation.

This can be considered an individual barrier induced by forced migration, as the research team only encountered it for migrants from countries affected by war or conflict, such as Syria. This type of barrier was consequently not identified for young migrants from the Republic of Moldova, since, for them, migration was voluntary. From this point of view, this is an additional argument and reason for the different integration speed of the two groups of migrants analyzed.

4.1.2. Barriers Related to Learning the Language

Language was probably the greatest barrier reported by young migrants from Arab countries. Learning Romanian was perceived as a big challenge since it is very different from Arabic or English. The lack of destination-language skills was perceived as an element of vulnerability (“*The foreigner in Romania as in any other country is vulnerable if he cannot speak the language*”, MY15_Bucharest_m_A).

All interviewed young migrants from Arab countries considered that the main route to integration essentially consisted of learning the language, which would facilitate connections to the local population and ease the understanding of the local culture, thus helping them to become part of the community:

“We have to connect to the people, to speak their language, if we want to remain here.” (MY8_Bucharest_f_A)

“As long as there is common ground it is easy to integrate. The language is important; if you speak, you are 85% integrated.” (MY15_Bucharest_m_A)

“When that person learns the language. I would say that is the most important aspect, no matter how long it takes to learn it. For me, trying to understand Romanian is a big part of the integration process. Also, understanding the culture, how people relate, trying the local dishes, learning about the history of the country, having a friendly rapport with the natives, and asking questions whenever you do not understand something.” (MY4_Bucharest_f_A)

Not speaking Romanian was a barrier in many aspects of life, from accessing the labor market to renting an apartment:

“Some real-estate agencies didn’t help us; they just wanted to take our money. It was hard to contact the apartment owners because most of them didn’t speak English.” (MY8_Bucharest_f_A)

For young migrants from the Republic of Moldova, the language barrier had a totally different, subtler dimension. This is due to the fact that the Moldovan migrants had a shared language with the local population, Romanian. They spoke it, but with a Moldovan accent, and there were some differences at the level of lexis. For instance, as one interviewee believed, there were more English influences on the Romanian language spoken in the host country and more Russian influences on the language spoken in the Republic of Moldova. Thus, a certain, specific Moldovan accent made migrants from the Republic of Moldova

easily recognizable by the local population. Because of this, most participants from the Republic of Moldova mentioned that sometimes, in the beginning, they had difficulties in communicating with the locals and were even the subject of bullying or discrimination incidents. One young female mentioned the following: *“It was difficult at the beginning with the accent. I also had to think of how you say this or that word. You could see from afar that I was from Moldova. It is the same language, but at the same time it is not the same language.”* (MY11_Iasi_f_M).

4.1.3. Barriers Related to Service Providers, Local Authorities, and Access to Education

Most participants mentioned the high bureaucracy at immigration offices, ambiguous information regarding the documentation needed, and steps to be taken for obtaining the proper legal documents, as well as an unwelcoming attitude of immigration office employees. This difficult and unfriendly communication and interaction with local authorities was mentioned by migrants from both geographical areas analyzed, but it was more emphasized by the migrants from Arab countries. An Algerian migrant described her interaction with the immigration office as follows:

“There is always a problem for foreigners with the administration. With the documents, a lot of documents. Also, the behavior of people from the administration. They don’t ease the process. They say: do like this, then no, do it a different way, come back. We are not available right now; you have to come at a different time.” (MY5_Bucharest_f_A)

Participants with refugee status mentioned the legal barriers and difficulties in obtaining a visa: *“I was refused my visa before coming to Romania because I did not know the language of the country, even though I wanted to come to study it in the preparation year.”* (FG3_f_Syria).

Moreover, many young migrants from Arab countries and Syria, in particular, indicated the restrictions in the banking system and the challenge they faced when opening a bank account. Since Syria was marked as a dangerous country in the international banking system, banks would not accept a Syrian passport to open a bank account: *“I was not able to open a bank account although I have a work permit (. . .) so I was not able to receive my monthly salary on a card”* (FG3_f_Syria). As expected, this was not a barrier mentioned by Moldovan migrants.

The language courses provided by NGOs or those offered in the preparation year at university were considered insufficient to learn the language: *“The language courses were not so relevant to communicate and interact with people and learn the language faster”* (FG3_f_Syria). Some participants were not even aware of the language courses provided by the NGOs, because of the rather low visibility of such actions.

The school legislation was considered inconsistent, highly bureaucratic, not transparent, and unfair for international students: *“Foreign students do not have equal rights with Romanians; each year the faculty changes a regulation and they apply it on us not on the new generation coming in the next years. This includes tuition fees, the fees for retaking an exam”* (FG4_m_Palestine). *“We [medical students, n.a.] can’t do the specialization exam after graduation and we need to leave the country directly. No one is offering help or giving us the correct answers about procedures. We are feeling lost.”* (FG4_m_Palestine).

Other educational barriers were related to adapting to a different system, especially for migrants coming from Arab countries (the way of writing, the terminology used, etc.). Although the school experience in Romania was generally positive, one interviewee felt that he did not have the same opportunities as his Romanian colleagues during university, as professors would favor Romanian students in certain situations. Legal and administrative barriers and restrictions in the educational system were also mentioned by young migrants from the Republic of Moldova. For instance, participants revealed that their scholarship was lower than that of Romanian students, but also that, unlike Romanian students, they could not swap their financing form on the basis of the learning results: *“We are considered from the beginning as foreigners [here in Romania, n.a.], we are not necessarily integrated as all the others”*

(FG1_f_Moldova). Participants from the Republic of Moldova reported some difficulties in switching from one educational system to another, talking about the differences in the evaluation system, as well as in the requirements of teachers and the overall approach in school.

4.1.4. Barriers Related to Labor Market Access and Economic Status

For young migrants of Arabic origin, the main barriers in accessing the labor market related to the difficulty of finding a job, to the lack of (proper) language skills, to limited job openings for internationals, and even to the reluctance of some companies to hire internationals. Even the job openings obtained through government agencies were considered not to be in line with expectations. The preferred way of labor market access occurred via recommendations from informal networks, rather than through direct applications. Those who were still studying usually took part-time jobs below their education level. For migrants who came to Romania for studies, the residency permit for studies only allowed part-time employment of maximum 4 h per day. For full-time jobs, the employer had to obtain a labor permit, which implied high bureaucracy and additional costs. Since not many companies were willing to do that, this was also considered a barrier for career advancement opportunities: *“I cannot have access to a better job because I don’t have citizenship, and the companies don’t want to get involved with the documents/papers for Immigration, because the process is rather complex, time-consuming [. . .]. For the moment I don’t have that many opportunities to change the job, because I don’t have the citizenship. For now, I stay here [at the current work place], maybe I learn something new. Maybe, until I obtain the response regarding the citizenship, I will advance at the current workplace, to put that in the CV.”* (MY8_Iasi_f_M).

Some interviewees acknowledged they felt exploited at work and not properly appreciated, mainly due to their legal status: *“Employers think they can exploit me, because I can work only 4 h/day; they consider I am like a child, and I don’t know a lot of things. I got all the tasks they don’t want to do for themselves. I was hired for 4 h but got to work even 8 h/day. The extra hours are not paid, and the salary was not big at all.”* (MY2_Iasi_f_M).

Another topic that emerged from the interviews was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants’ professional lives. For some of them, the pandemic caused disruptions, the market sector they worked in was affected by the pandemic, or they lost their work motivation because of the online work environment.

Most young migrants participating in the research considered their economic situation to be satisfactory. A few of the young migrants from Arab countries who were in Romania with large families admitted that their financial situation was difficult, and that they received financial support from relatives in other European countries. In general, the interviewees considered that the cost of living was higher in Romania compared to their home country.

Financial help from NGOs was considered to be limited and, therefore, migrant students with a scholarship admitted that it covered only the basic expenses, and that it was also discontinued during the summer. Thus, most of them felt obliged to take at least part-time jobs for an extra source of income.

The financial situation appeared to be slightly better for young migrants from the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, those working usually used their Russian or Ukrainian language skills and received language bonuses when applying for jobs. They acknowledged that it would have been more difficult without this bonus. While those with a shorter labor experience reported some financial struggles, for those with a longer labor experience, the financial situation appeared to be better, as compared to what it was in the beginning:

“It is a big difference compared to 3 years ago when I was paying attention to every penny I was spending. Now I afford to pay all the bills, the credits, and I can even save some money. I cannot imagine how I could handle the money I had back then.” (MY9_Iasi_f_M)

In what concerns the accommodation, most participants lived in rented apartments, alone or together with their family members, colleagues, or friends. The living conditions in the rented apartments were considered decent, while those in dormitories, on the contrary, had crowded rooms, insufficient space, lack of intimacy, scarce living facilities, and very strict rules. This description emerged both from the interviews with Arab migrants and from those with Moldovans. Young migrants from Arab countries, in particular, also mentioned that, in the beginning, they encountered problems with renting, as it seemed that landlords had more trust in Romanians and were reluctant to rent to foreigners, something that was not mentioned by the Moldovan migrants.

“We are seven people, we had difficulties in finding the apartment because we are refugees, are foreigners, and are numerous.” (MY9_Bucharest_f_A)

4.1.5. Barriers Related to the Relationship with the Local Population

Overall, there were no major discrimination events reported, with most participants stating that they did not feel discriminated against. However, almost all mentioned some isolated incidents (of a racist nature), but admitted that this was not the general case, and that this could happen also in their home country. One interviewee declared that he felt discriminated by some neighbors in his area, because he did not speak the language well enough. The local seniors were perceived as more rigid and not welcoming to people from a different culture, religion, or background. Further barriers in the relationship with the local population included misconceptions about the country of origin, especially for migrants from Arab countries. Participants considered that locals were sometimes misinformed and prone to generalization, and that the media was distorting the real information:

“People thought we lived in the desert, in tents, we don’t have buildings, we don’t have technology [. . .]. I think this is because the media focuses on Saudi Arabia more, so they thought you are a Muslim you are an Arab, you live in a tent. You don’t know anything in the technology world [. . .]. I understand their point of view. The media, this is what they tell us.” (MY6_Bucharest_f_A)

Generally, interviewees who were faced with such misconceptions considered that they had a responsibility to show the real image of their people:

“The wrong idea they have is ISIS, because ISIS came and it ruined our image and I try to show them that we don’t kill, we don’t hate each other, that our religion is a peaceful religion and we love each other and we love all the other religions; we are not racist (. . .). Everything that people know is wrong (. . .). I always try to share on my Instagram and on my Facebook account photos about Syria and how we live (. . .), in order to show the people here how we really are.” (MY6_Bucharest_f_A)

One interviewee from Afghanistan had an appearance on a Romanian TV show in order to clarify the real situation in Afghanistan and to try and make the local population understand that refugees are not a burden but a benefit for the society:

“I wanted to be their voice [of the people who were left behind in Afghanistan]. We lived in war for 20 years, for us it became normal—I wanted people to understand, to know the reality of Afghanistan. The war became a normality. I didn’t want for this [the war] to become the norm for everybody [in Afghanistan] (. . .). I wanted to talk about this. I am a refugee, I came here, I learned the language, I go to school, I will become a doctor. I will work for this country, for this people. I am not a bad person. I didn’t come here to do bad things. If I work, it is a good thing for your country. This is what I want to say to people.” (MY9_Bucharest_f_A)

Young migrants from the Republic of Moldova also mentioned that they were exposed to misconceptions, but to a lower extent compared to Arab migrants. For instance, some of the young women in the focus groups mentioned an existing preconception that most Moldovan girls work in the video-chat industry. There was also a type of bullying directed

toward them because of the specific Moldovan accent (“Some people say—Oh, you are from Moldova, you have this accent . . . I don’t understand a thing you say. They have a superior attitude” (MY2_Iasi_f_M)). However, only a few participants reported these types of incidents, mainly because there was an affinity and sympathy of the local population toward the Moldovan culture, being better known and understood by the locals compared to the Arab culture.

4.2. Resilience

Participants developed several resilience strategies to cope with the challenges and difficulties faced in their migration experience. On the basis of the themes identified from the focus groups and from the interviews, we grouped these resilience strategies on four levels: individual level; family level; community (formal and informal) level; local population level.

4.2.1. Resilience at Individual Level

The migration experience had a significant impact on the personal development of young migrants, both from Arab countries and from the Republic of Moldova. Our research results indicate that, generally, young migrants from the Republic of Moldova came to Romania in search of a better life; thus, they were usually very ambitious, had a strong desire to succeed in life, and were hard-working, tenacious, and perfectionists. They relied mostly on themselves, and overcoming the challenges by themselves strengthened their character.

Young migrants who came to Romania alone acknowledged that they became responsible and independent. They had to find inner strength to overcome adversities; they became more patient and tolerant, learned to be courageous, determined, and more optimistic when facing challenges brought by life, and also learned how to turn difficulties into opportunities:

“When you come here [to a foreign country], you become responsible for every single aspect of your life because all the basic things, from what you are going to eat, to school, to friends, are now your responsibility (. . .). You realize that you are more courageous when you have to face such difficulties and you don’t have to call back home for help.” (MY4_Bucharest_f_A)

Although migration was perceived as a challenging experience, it was also seen as something necessary for self-development and an experience that helped young migrants to become more mature:

“Sometimes you have to make hard decisions, but you have to make them for the sake of improving your life, because if you don’t improve yourself, you won’t be able to help the people you love and you care about. So, the first step was to accept challenges. In my thinking I have that saying: ‘The bigger the struggle, the bigger the price.’ You slowly adapt to the new situation. I learned how to manage my time. I learned troubleshooting, how to solve issues fast. I learned how to think logically. The things that happened in Romania had a mental impact on me.” (MY16_Bucharest_m_A)

Moreover, migrants from Arab countries who managed to learn Romanian considered this a personal victory and an achievement that enhanced their self-esteem.

4.2.2. Family Support

All interviewees (except one) mentioned that family was of utmost importance in their lives, a priority, and the main source of support. Those who were in Romania with their families admitted that, had they been alone, it would have been more difficult, even impossible to reside in the host country:

“They mean a lot to me; they have been with me through my ups and downs. Whenever I had a hard time or some unpleasant experiences, they used to comfort me. It would have been much harder if they were not here.” (MY10_Bucharest_f_A)

Those who did not live with their family disclosed that it was discouraging at the beginning, but facing the situation alone made them stronger. Moreover, the family was considered to be the greatest emotional support in coping with the stress of their new lives in the host country. All participants referred to strong family relationships that made them feel safe and comfortable:

“I have a great relationship with my family. My siblings and my parents are really . . . [sigh and short pause, n.a.]. We have a good rapport. The most important reason why I am still standing without depression [in Romania] is my family, because they acknowledge that I am far away and they call regularly; we talk for long hours on the phone, we make the same jokes. For every family event, they call me along to share it together.” (MY4_Bucharest_f_A)

Male migrants from Arab countries did not perceive the lack of parents and siblings as much as their female counterparts. Many interviewees reported that they still followed the traditions of their home countries or of their families as a resilience mechanism. Cooking traditional dishes or celebrating holidays (with other relatives who also lived in Romania or with the community of Arab ethnics) were mentioned by most participants with Arab origins. For young migrants from the Republic of Moldova, family was also considered to be of the greatest emotional help and very supportive in their migration journey:

“I could always count on the support of my parents, when I was in Moldova, but also when I came to Romania. Even from a distance, they were my support, not just from a material point of view, but also by encouraging me.” (MY7_Iasi_m_M)

“Family is my support; that’s where I get my energy from.” (MY5_Iasi_m_M)

Many interviewees from the Republic of Moldova referred to the values that they received at home as children (such as politeness, integrity, morality, doing good, and behaving appropriately) and acknowledged that they still felt guided by these values. Many cited the Romanian saying “*seven years at home*”, referring to the education children receive at home before turning 7 and going to school.

4.2.3. Formal and Informal Community Support

Migrants from both sending regions reported little support obtained from formal organizations or administrative institutions. Mostly, the positive experiences in relation to official institutions were related to the interaction with educational institutions (with the international relations offices in universities), which were seen as very helpful for adapting to student life in Romania, even providing the necessary provisions during lockdown in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. For young migrants from the Republic of Moldova who came to Romania for studies, educational institutions indirectly eased their migration journey by providing the legal documents for their stay, enabling the possibility to obtain a residence permit according to their student status. Moreover, most Romanian universities had special tuition places dedicated to students from the Republic of Moldova.

Education can also be considered a resilience strategy, since most of the young migrants interviewed agreed that education was one of the most important aspects in life, a key to opening several doors:

“Very, very important. It is the most important thing for me. When you are educated, life becomes easier. Life becomes beautiful. You know a lot of things and life will not be hard. You can integrate with people, you can communicate, you can make friends.” (MY17_Bucharest_m_A)

“Education is very important in the life of a young man. It helps in many aspects: stability, how to construct a good plan, a clear plan for one’s life. It plays a very important role.” (MY14_Bucharest_m_A)

In the same context of receiving formal support, only one immigration center (a regional center, not in Bucharest) was mentioned by two of the interviewees as offering consistent support with the legal documents. Two interviewees (young females from Arab countries) reported experiences with health services in Romania. One of them was very grateful for being able to receive surgery for free in Romania, which would have never been possible in her home country. Some young migrants from Arab countries, particularly those having a refugee status, referred to the help from NGOs: support with the visa, small financial provisions, or language courses. However, the participation in the events organized by NGOs was minimal. Furthermore, the support from NGOs was deemed as insufficient and inconsistent.

The highest informal support came from the communities of migrants from the same countries or having the same cultural background (Muslim community). Participants talked about their meetings to celebrate important holidays and the fact that they shared the same kind of challenges, learning from their immigration experience:

“Most of them are going through the same kind of stress I go through as well. They play a big part (. . .). We work together, we have shared goals, we grow together. Everything we do is centered around the origins. Yes, they offer help with information about the immigration. Also, many of them speak Romanian; some are actually fluent, and this helps a lot when you want to learn the language. The community helps with all kinds of useful information.” (MY4_Bucharest_f_A)

Similarly, young migrants from the Republic of Moldova relied mainly on ethnic peer support (mutual help, exchange of information, support in finding work, etc.):

“There is a community of migrants from the Republic of Moldova. There are some small communities, we help each other; there is somebody who understands your life, your roots.” (MY4_Iasi_f_M)

4.2.4. Support Received from the Local Population

The support received from the local population was also important. Generally, the locals were perceived as nice, helpful, welcoming, and open-minded people. Some of the interviewees spoke of the fact that some of the Romanians became their friends. Many interviewees declared that they received extensive help and support from their Romanian acquaintances and friends:

“The Romanians, if they know I am a foreigner, they are happy about this, they are okay, they want to help, unlike the other countries where people don't care because they already have a lot of foreigners in their countries, so maybe they don't care about you, they won't talk to you, they don't want to help you. The Romanians are so much better, and it is so much easier to communicate with them if you compare them to the French and Germans. Romanians are better, especially for students from abroad who do not know anything about Europe. It is so much easier to communicate with Romanians.” (MY18_Bucharest_m_A)

“They helped me a lot [the Romanian friends]. They helped me in every aspect of my life in Romania. If I wanted a job, they offered to help with the job. When it was about the residency permit, they said maybe they can help me. If it was with religion, they were all respectful and I didn't feel any difficulty. Regarding my religion, I thought maybe I'd be more restricted because of being a Muslim in Romania, but no, I don't have any problem with that. People totally respect it.” (MY19_Bucharest_m_A)

For Moldovan migrants, friends (locals or ethnic peers) and colleagues at school also offered support and eased the loneliness, in addition to providing good pieces of advice for a better integration:

“I had some friends here whom I used to go out with, whom I met at the Uni; we studied together at the beginning. I didn’t feel that lonely because I was always encircled by some friends and we always met, so yeah, I felt that the loneliness was a little bit relieved.” (MY18_Bucharest_m_A)

4.3. Self-Perception of Vulnerability

In this subsection we explore the subjective vulnerability of the participants, since the migrant status is associated with a vulnerability condition. The self-perceived vulnerabilities of migrants help also in understanding the barriers they face in their integration and, consequently, the resilience strategies they adopt for their integration. Complex perceptions of vulnerability and their multiple possible causes are synthesized in the following excerpt from an interview with a female migrant from the Republic of Moldova:

“I am vulnerable because I don’t know enough people to have access to solve things quicker, easier (like the locals do). I don’t know all the cultural things of Romanians. Also, legally (because of my papers). Someone might say something such as ‘you are Moldovan, you don’t have all the rights here, you are not allowed to speak up [. . .].’ Vulnerability means uncertainty, loneliness, lack of confidence, anxiety. A vulnerable person has a lot of fears, no confidence, is very stressed out by new things.” (MY2_Iasi_f_M)

Migrants’ responses regarding their self-perception as vulnerable were mixed. Only a few migrants from Arab countries acknowledged themselves as vulnerable, while some considered that they were more vulnerable when they first arrived in the host country. Others believed that migrants and people from ethnic minorities, especially those coming from Arab countries, could be considered a vulnerable group, being prone to discrimination due to race or religion. However, at a personal level, they did not consider themselves vulnerable from this perspective, but that they could be discriminated against because of their foreigner status in any other situation. One participant from Lebanon expressed her feelings of vulnerability as follows:

“I don’t consider myself vulnerable, but Arabs can be considered vulnerable, because they are not from Europe. But it depends on the situation. Sometimes I don’t take it as a discrimination because I feel that people may feel different toward someone who is [not like them, n.a.]; they may not feel comfortable to be with them or to talk to them.” (FG3_f_Lebanon)

One male migrant from Palestine mentioned the following:

“Yes, actually I am [vulnerable], in Romania. Here, people can trick me easily because they are aware that I do not know how the system works. Even if I have spent 6 years here, I still don’t know how the system works. Because of this, people can trick me easily, and I think that this is my point of vulnerability.” (MY17_Bucharest_m_A)

One migrant from Afghanistan claimed that she had to partly give up her traditions to better adapt to the local lifestyle:

“Yes, I felt vulnerable when I arrived here, especially at the beginning. Because you don’t know the language, you don’t have friends, you don’t know anybody. You don’t know who to trust. It changed me a lot. Before, I also wore hijab, I had to take down the hijab.” (MY9_Bucharest_f_A)

Although concerns linked to preconceptions and negative opinions regarding Moldovans could exist, these were not reasons for vulnerability.

This section presented the detailed findings resulting from the 35 interviews and four focus groups with young migrants, revealing the main barriers to integration in the host society, their resilience strategies, and the perceived vulnerability. The results were driven by individual characteristics, but also by cultural and group factors. A discussion of the main results is provided in the next section.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we explored the perceptions of two groups of young migrants in Romania, of Arab and Moldovan origin, as these constitute the largest international communities living in Romania. The two groups are not comparable in all of their characteristics, as a large share of Moldovans have double citizenship (Romanian and Moldovan), and they have a shared language with that of the local population, Romanian, even if spoken with a Moldovan accent. In our hypothesis, this created the premise for facing different barriers to integrate in the host society. All interviewed migrants were finding themselves in different vulnerable conditions when selected. Therefore, in this section, we explore the similarities and differences in the barriers they encountered during the integration process, their perceived vulnerability, and the resilience strategies they developed.

The most important requirements for a good integration, referred to by both groups, were knowing the language, financial stability, a stable workplace, knowing the habits/culture of the local population, and establishing a family in the host country. Inspired by the structural approach of integration (Ager and Strang 2008), barriers to integration were grouped into five categories: (1) at the individual level; (2) learning the language; (3) related to local services and access to education; (4) referring to labor market and the economic situation; (5) related to interaction with the local population.

As can be observed in Figure 1, the barriers to integration at the individual level were significantly different for the two groups of migrants, and they were considerably more difficult for the group of Arab migrants. Language was a clear barrier for both groups; however, for Arab migrants, the consequences of a poor language proficiency were critical as the access to the new culture and society was restricted. However, Moldovan migrants did not have problems with understanding Romanian, yet they faced some difficulties in spoken Romanian, due to their specific accent, with Slavonic influences and some outdated vocabulary. Thus, the language barrier had very different implications for the integration of the two different groups.

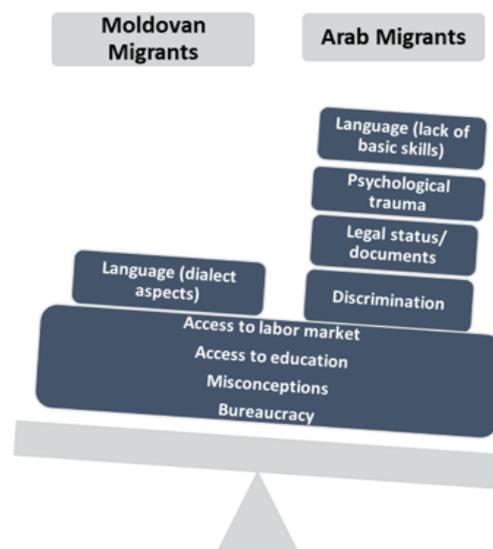


Figure 1. Integration barriers in the case of Moldovan and Arab migrants in Romania (elaborated by the authors).

Trauma and psychological distress caused by war and having to leave their countries was an integration barrier encountered only for Arab migrants. They had more difficulties in obtaining legal documents compared to Moldovan migrants, a barrier that was also associated with their countries of origin. Moreover, Arab migrants were more likely to be the subject of discrimination incidents.

Integration barriers common to both groups of migrants referred to the legal access to the labor market, access to education, facing the bureaucracy of public institutions, and

experiencing misconceptions from the local population. As expected, the results show that all these common barriers were harsher for Arab migrants than for Moldovan ones. For instance, the access to the labor market was also hindered by language; there were also more misconceptions from the local population associated with the Arab culture than with the Moldovan one.

To cope with the new life in the host country, four types of resilience strategies were identified: (1) at individual level; (2) family support; (3) formal and informal support received from the migrant's community; (4) support received from the local population. The identified resilience strategies are in line with the findings of [Wu et al. \(2018\)](#), who emphasized that resilience is a multidimensional concept that concerns itself with the quality of life and the general wellbeing of an individual's physical and mental health.

Our results show that the respondents from both groups were strongly determined to succeed in life, working hard and being able to overcome challenges associated with migration. This may be associated with youth enthusiasm and endurance. Living in a foreign country was also considered a self-transforming process, sometimes even characterized as necessary for self-development, in line with other existing results on youth mobility ([Nienaber et al. 2020](#); [Roman et al. 2018](#)).

Respondents from both groups mentioned that the family relations remained as strong as they were back home. Maintaining customs and habits was mentioned as a resilience mechanism, more visible in the case of Arab migrants. With a different cultural background, they expended more effort to preserve their habits, as highlighted in the FG3 by Arab female respondents. Furthermore, family provided great support for all those migrating alone.

Both groups reported little support obtained from formal organizations or administrative institutions, except for educational institutions. Refugees from Arab countries, in particular, appreciated the support of the NGOs as a resilience mechanism, which complemented and sometimes substituted the role of the public authorities. This confirms the existing evidence that public authorities should enforce their role in integration policy in Romania, and that NGOs, a more active player, should receive more support ([Grassi 2021](#); [M. Matei et al. 2020](#)). However, the greatest support was received from migrants' ethnic peers, while help offered by the local population was also acknowledged by both groups. Romanians were generally characterized as being warm and nice people, and the discrimination level was perceived as being low, which was also a resilience mechanism. This is in line with other studies which highlighted that, compared to other countries, discrimination in Romania is at a lower level ([Cimpoeru et al. 2021](#)).

Our comparative analysis showed significant differences in the integration barriers, confirming our research hypothesis. However, we found more similar coping strategies in the two groups of migrants. Therefore, the two groups seemingly used a similar "arsenal" (resilience strategies) for overcoming different sets of barriers. This had a strong impact on (i) individuals' perceived vulnerability and (ii) the integration process.

The barriers encountered in the integration process led to a feeling of vulnerability for migrants. The results show how the difficulties migrants faced in the host society were reflected in their self-perceived vulnerability. Language could be considered a gate toward the new culture and, when not spoken, it created a feeling of vulnerability, most strikingly for Arab migrants. For them, not having any knowledge of the Romanian language increased their feeling of vulnerability, as they were not able to communicate with the locals or with public authorities. They also had more difficulties in learning Romanian, a language that was totally different from their own; therefore, they needed more support in this endeavor. Both groups claimed several similar factors that created vulnerable conditions; however, in the case of Arab migrants, vulnerability was more intensively perceived when associated with language or with war trauma. Due to the lack of specific, adequate support, the most vulnerable group and that facing higher difficulties—in our analysis, the group of Arab migrants—had to invest significantly more effort for overcoming the integration barriers. Compared to Moldovan migrants, the integration of Arab migrants could be a longer and more challenging process. According to the views expressed by

both groups, integration requires time and, according to one participant, it should be a liquid process. However, it emerged from the interviews that young migrants from Arabic countries considered that they needed more time to integrate compared to those from Republic of Moldova. For instance, one participant from an Arab country mentioned that the integration process requires time, but that there is no standard timeframe:

“What I understand by a person being integrated is when you are surrounded by people who understand you well, and you can understand them, and they are from the country you’re living in. So that time you become an integrated. So maybe it can take 5 years or something like that. For some other people, it can just take 1 year.” (MY11_RO_Bucharest_f_A)

As this participant mentioned, for some people, integration might occur in 1 year, while, for others, it could take more than 5 years. Nevertheless, it appears that, from the perspective of Moldovan migrants, integration occurred more rapidly:

“I was a little vulnerable in the first half of the year when I moved to Iasi because it was something new for me.” (MY14_Iasi_m)

“I feel better compared to how it was in the beginning. In the beginning, I felt like a stranger, I felt I was just a guest, a visitor for a certain time period.” (MY12_Iasi_f_M)

Our novel comparative approach allows, therefore, observing two different groups of migrants, recently arrived, similar in age, and being in vulnerable conditions, but different in their individual characteristics, as well as the migration contexts at origin and destination. Confirming our research hypothesis, the findings suggest that the integration process in the two cases was impacted by various barriers and (more similar) resilience strategies. This created different individual perceptions on vulnerability.

Even if Section 4 emphasized individual characteristics and ethnicity, this did not obscure the structural aspects of migrant integration. Loyal to the concept of liquid integration, the comparative analysis revealed integration differences between ethnic groups. The different barriers or opportunities encountered by the two groups did nothing but to emphasize various structural integration or resilience strategies developed by them. Therefore, integration should be regarded as a dynamic process, having various paces for different migrant groups. In the case of the young Moldovan and Arab migrants in Romania, there were seemingly two specific speeds of integration, slower for the latter.

6. Conclusions

Our study attempted to explore possible differences in integration barriers and resilience strategies experienced by Moldovan and Arab youth in Romania, while also acknowledging existing similarities. A comparative analysis was, therefore, employed, which showed that the language barrier, lack of access to information, restricted access to the labor market, and lack of proper legal documents could cause significant vulnerabilities for both groups. For Arab youth, in particular, psychological trauma caused by fleeing from war or conflict zones also caused significant distress. Both groups identified similar barriers related to local services and access to education. The high levels of bureaucracy and the ambiguity of information were regarded as problems. In general, the social relationships with the local population in Romania were considered positive, without issues of discrimination. Furthermore, vulnerability was shown to reduce over time, once the migrants integrated better into the host society, yet this was viewed as a time-consuming process.

Through the psychosocial narratives employed, this research “gave voice” to young, vulnerable migrants, whose opinion would have otherwise probably remained unheard. As opposed to other data collection instruments, the psychosocial interviews allowed in-depth insight into the intimacies of the migrants, which led to a better understanding of their vulnerabilities and resilience strategies in the host society. An important original contribution of this paper is that it focused on a strictly defined demographic group of migrants: young, vulnerable migrants aged 18 to 29 living in Romania. While existing

studies focused on migrants, in general, less attention has been given to this particular group of young migrants. While self-perceptions of vulnerability differed among migrants, one common thread is that participants identified the lack of their families and the lack of host country language skills as major sources of vulnerability. Moreover, Arab migrants understood their vulnerabilities differently from Moldovan migrants. This allows us to claim that integration and resilience strategies strongly differed between the ethnic groups. This paper also makes an important contribution to the topic of immigrant integration in Romania by exploring and introducing the concept of liquid integration/flexible integration to this national scale. As shown by the research results, integration occurs at different paces for different migrant groups, which proves that cultural differences need to be considered when analyzing or conceptualizing integration.

Even if the psychosocial interviews and focus groups allowed detailed access to the opinions of migrants, they also constituted one of the limitations of this paper. In terms of methods employed, this research lacks the insights that might have been provided by a quantitative analysis based on statistical data. Future research should also focus on statistical analyses in order to offer a view as complete as possible of the integration and resilience of migrants.

At a more general level, our results confirm that initial migration conditions and the migrants' individual characteristics play a crucial role in perceiving vulnerability and in adopting specific integration strategies. This conclusion may be relevant for migration practitioners and for policymakers, being a strong argument for a more flexible and responsive integration policy. Unlike other European countries, Romania does not have a specific integration strategy, while integration is a component of the general immigration strategy based on several Government Ordinances, i.e., G.O. 194/2002, G.O. 44/2004, and G.O. 56/2007 (M. Matei et al. 2020). This creates a less flexible integration environment, as the specific needs of various migrant groups are not properly addressed. Therefore, other stakeholders, such as peers or NGOs, play an active role in resilience strategies employed by various migrant categories. Hence, the findings of this research might also prove useful for public policy decision-makers, practitioners, or NGOs if they want to adjust their interventions depending on the migrant groups.

Starting from the main findings of this paper, future research might focus in more detail on specific aspects of migrant integration, such as access to the labor market, access to educational services, and access to medical services, in order to prove if and how these can improve the wellbeing of migrants and their integration pathways in the host society.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.R.; methodology, E.-M.P.; software, M.R.; validation, M.R., L.M. and V.I.R.; formal analysis, S.C. and I.M.; investigation, M.R., L.M., E.-M.P., S.C., I.M., V.I.R.; resources, M.R.; data curation, M.R. and E.-M.P.; writing—original draft preparation, M.R., S.C. and I.M.; writing—review and editing, M.R., V.I.R. and L.M.; visualization, M.R. and V.I.R.; supervision, M.R.; project administration, M.R.; funding acquisition, M.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research project MIMY was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 870700.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This research was conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the MIMY project leadership (ERP 19-055 MIMY; 6 March 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Description of participants in the semi-structured interviews.

Code	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Number of Years in Romania	Education/Labour Status at Time of Interview
MY1_Iasi_f_M	F	27	Moldova	2 years	Student, employed
MY2_Iasi_f_M	F	23	Moldova	3 years	Student, employed
MY3_Iasi_m_M	M	29	Moldova	8 years	Graduate, employed
MY4_Iasi_f_M	F	20	Moldova	5 years	Student, unemployed
MY5_Iasi_m_M	M	23	Moldova	7 years	Student, employed
MY6_Iasi_m_M	M	28	Moldova	1 year, 6 months	Graduate, employed
MY7_Iasi_m_M	M	25	Moldova	5 years	Graduate, employed
MY8_Iasi_f_M	F	26	Moldova	1 year, 9 months	Graduate, employed
MY9_Iasi_f_M	F	29	Moldova	9 years	Student, employed
MY10_Iasi_m_M	M	22	Moldova	10 years	Student, unemployed
MY11_Iasi_f_M	F	21	Moldova	3 years	Student, unemployed
MY12_Iasi_f_M	F	22	Moldova	5 years	Student, employed
MY13_Iasi_f_M	F	29	Moldova	14 years	Graduate, employed
MY14_Iasi_m_M	M	22	Moldova	7 years	Student, employed
MY15_Iasi_m_M	M	22	Moldova	3 years	Student, unemployed
MY1_Bucharest_f_A	F	26	Syria	3 years, 6 months	Student, employed
MY2_Bucharest_f_A	F	28	Sudan	5 years	Student, unemployed
MY3_Bucharest_f_A	F	20	Syria	8 years	Student, unemployed
MY4_Bucharest_f_A	F	20	Cameroon	2 years	Student, unemployed
MY5_Bucharest_f_A	F	29	Algeria	2 years	Student, unemployed
MY6_Bucharest_f_A	F	21	Syria	4 years	Student, unemployed
MY7_Bucharest_f_A	F	27	Azerbaijan	1 years	Student, unemployed
MY8_Bucharest_f_A	F	20	Yemen	1 years	Student, unemployed
MY9_Bucharest_f_A	F	20	Afghanistan	4 years	Student, unemployed
MY10_Bucharest_f_A	F	21	Lebanon	4 years	Graduate, employed
MY11_Bucharest_f_A	F	24	Sudan	1 year, 2 months	Student, employed
MY12_Bucharest_m_A	M	30	Syria	1 year, 6 months	Graduate, employed
MY13_Bucharest_m_A	M	30	Syria	6 months	Graduate, employed
MY14_Bucharest_m_A	M	28	Syria	4 years	Student, unemployed
MY15_Bucharest_m_A	M	29	Syria	3 years	Graduate, employed
MY16_Bucharest_m_A	M	26	Yemen	4 years	Student, employed
MY17_Bucharest_m_A	M	21	Palestine	6 years	Student, unemployed
MY18_Bucharest_m_A	M	20	Lebanon	3 years	Student, unemployed
MY19_Bucharest_m_A	M	20	Afghanistan	1 year, 2 months	Student, unemployed
MY20_Bucharest_m_A	M	23	Yemen	2 years	Student, employed

Table A2. Description of the focus group participants.

Focus Group	Number of Participants	Gender	Country of Origin	Codes
Focus group 1	5	4 Females and 1 male	Moldova	FG1_f_Moldova
Focus group 2	6	3 Females and 6 males	Moldova	FG2_f_Moldova
Focus group 3	5	5 Females	Syria, Lebanon	FG3_f_Syria, FG3_f_Lebanon
Focus group 4	5	5 Males	Palestine	FG3_f_Palestine

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