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INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION OF THE POPULATION UNDER THE COVID PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented challenge, with very severe socio-economic consequences. We are committed to doing everything necessary to meet this challenge in a spirit of solidarity (Buck, Arnold, Chazan, Cookson, 2020). A coordinated and comprehensive strategy is needed to address urgent health needs, support economic activity and prepare the ground for recovery. This strategy should combine short, medium and long-term initiatives, taking into account the spreads and links between our economies and the need to maintain confidence and stability. Several measures have already been taken at national and EU level, as set out in the Eurogroup statement, in an inclusive format from 16 March. Medium-term and longer-term planning is needed for how the economy is rebalanced and revived following this crisis. A comprehensive socio-economic development plan, including sectoral sectoral plans and an ecosystem that encourages entrepreneurship so that those with strong and sustainable business models can flourish. Governments and financial institutions need to constantly reassess the situation and ensure that things do not get out of hand (Marek, 2020).*

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JEL Classification: *J1, J61, C33*

1. Introduction

The pandemic and its aftermath have affected the lives of people around the world. But migrants are much more affected than any other population group.

This is what the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has found. Migrants have managed to ensure the functioning of sectors such as health, trade and logistics, even during restrictions. In the midst of the pandemic, governments have taken exceptional measures, such as the one decided by the Berlin executive to allow foreign seasonal workers access to Germany.

According to data published by the OECD, migrants represent on average 24 percent of all doctors and 16 percent of care staff, thus being at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. Due to the higher number of direct contacts but also, often due to inadequate living conditions, in overcrowded areas, a large percentage of migrants became infected with coronavirus. Several studies conducted in a number of OECD member countries have revealed that the risk of infection is twice as high among migrants as the local population. (Ellis, 2020).

At the same time, migrants are more affected by the economic consequences of the pandemic than other groups. Many of them work in gastronomy, in hotels, in tourism - so exactly in the industries that are now fighting for survival. In the so-called HORECA sector in the EU, about a quarter of employees come from third countries, twice as many as in the rest of the economic sectors. Employment contracts in the field are often very short-term. As such, migrants are the first to be sent into unemployment (GmbH finanzen net, 2020). There are not enough data yet, but it is already clear that migrants are severely affected in southern European countries, Ireland, Sweden, Norway and the United States.

An important aspect is the closure of schools. The children of migrants have been and remain particularly affected when the courses take place online. Parents have, on average, less resources, for example, they do not have a computer, they have less living space and, in the absence of language skills, they cannot help their children with homework. Home-schooling puts migrants' children at a greater disadvantage.

The pandemic has drastically reduced migration to OECD countries. According to initial estimates, in the first half of the current year, the migration rate has halved. The closure of borders, the restriction of passengers, the cessation of air transport has determined this evolution. The OECD does not believe that the situation will change too soon, even if the economy returns to normal capacity. One reason is that, during the pandemic, many jobs were replaced by telework, which means much less human mobility (Gamal, Lawler, Astakhova, 2020).

The obvious effects of COVID-19 are also felt in the countries of origin of migrants. Bank transfers from those working abroad to families left at home have fallen sharply. OECD analysts also believe that the coordinated actions

of the authorities in the countries preferred by immigrants to combat illegal migration have led to increased frustration in the countries of origin.

Against the background of rising unemployment, the OECD also believes that xenophobia will be much more present in everyday life, because immigrants are seen as potential competitors. In some states, there are campaigns to combat the idea that immigrants are competitors in the labor market and guilty of spreading the virus (Rediff Realtime News, 2020).

The OECD considers migration to be fundamentally positive, “an integral part of our lives”, “something that binds us”. It is the pandemic, isolation and barriers that have shown us “how much we need others,” explains Stefano Scarpetta, director of social affairs and labor at the OECD. There is a danger that through the pandemic and its consequences, the progress made in the field of migration and integration will be partially annihilated. Governments should see the integration of migrants as a long-term investment in the interests of all.

2. The situation of the diaspora

The situation of the mobility diaspora has a particular relevance against the background of the health crisis caused by COVID-19, as well as the economic crisis generated by the medical crisis, in the context in which it is estimated that 3.4 million Romanian citizens lived in OECD countries in 2016, constituting the fifth diaspora in size in OECD countries. The situation of the diaspora and the dynamics of departures and arrivals among those who leave the country for longer or shorter periods of time to work in other states raise a number of epidemiological, social and economic issues. A large diaspora also implies the existence of a flow of people circulating between Romania and the destination countries, representing a potential risk of spreading the new coronavirus.

Migrants have a more vulnerable situation on the labor market compared to the native population, and job insecurity exposes them to the risks of social exclusion in crisis situations, to a greater extent compared to the native population. Social and professional integration at the destination also means the recognition and equivalence of diplomas and professional qualifications, which leads to overqualification for the jobs they hold, especially in the first years after reaching the destination, while lower language proficiency in compared to the natives increases the gap in access to the labor market (Sohrabi et al., 2020). Thus, migrants generally occupy lower-paid jobs on the labor market at their destination, with a fixed-term contract or, in some cases, even without a contract, with a reduced working hour or at non-standard time intervals (eg shifts nightly).

The economic crisis has put in difficulty some of the Romanian migrants in states severely affected by the pandemic, being those with a precarious position on the labor market, as well as those involved in economic sectors severely affected by the effects of the medical crisis. It should be noted that Romanian migrants in the EU and whose mobility is aimed at work fall into two patterns of migration, represented to a greater or lesser extent: long-term migration, with low circularity, and high-circulation migration, associated with seasonal jobs in economic sectors such as agriculture. The impact that the crisis generated by the pandemic has on the Romanian diaspora is influenced on the one hand by the type of migration (long-term versus short-term circulatory), by the level of damage of the destination country, as well as by the type of economic activity. which migrants carry out their activity (Wilson, 2020).

For long-term migrants with low circularity, the health crisis did not lead to the need for an urgent return to the country, while for short-term migrants, staying at the destination in the context of the pandemic was not necessarily an option. Also, not all sectors of the economy were equally affected in the destination states, just as the impact of the health crisis on the economy was not the same in all states. Sectors such as health care, the elderly or people with disabilities, agriculture, courier services or call centers have intensified their work in need of additional manpower. In the context of the EU closing its borders to workers outside the Community, the demand for certain low-skilled jobs has increased, leading to new opportunities for intra-Community workers / potential workers.

In order to estimate the potential effects of the pandemic on migration flows to and from Romania, we will describe in this section Romania's border traffic between March and April 2020, and the situation of the Romanian diaspora in EU countries with emphasis on their position on the market. to estimate the extent to which the current context places members of the mobility diaspora in a vulnerable group.

In agriculture, for example, where work depends on the nature of the harvest and there is no continuous, constant flow of activities of the same type, fixed-term employment contracts are concluded. This type of employment is a niche for immigrant workers, given their temporary nature and working conditions, which are more difficult than in other economic sectors, but also the low level of skills needed to achieve them, including language skills. destination. Studies show that Germany has promoted migration of this type, in the case of Romanian citizens, but seasonal migration is also found in other destination countries. Given that avoiding or limiting, as far as possible, a possible economic crisis involves keeping lucrative activities at a level similar to the pre-pandemic, this type of cross-border mobility is expected to continue. In turn, this brings with it the need for precautions to stop the spread

of the virus, and increased attention to living and working conditions at the destination (Plante, & Patel, 2019).

It is worth mentioning, here, the case of seasonal workers in Romania recruited for work in agriculture in countries like Germany and Great Britain (Icociu, et al., 2019b). This type of international mobility is a problematic aspect during this period, being associated with risks both for workers, due to the nature of work and working and living conditions, and for the inhabitants of the destination, respectively origin with which migrants would interact, they may be vectors of virus circulation. A case that has been intensely debated in the media is that of Romanian workers recruited for asparagus harvests in Germany: in the context of the pandemic, the way in which their departure to the destination country took place / was organized, including the way home to the airport of departure, was a hotly debated topic in the press, due to non-compliance with the rules imposed by the state of emergency (social distancing, the establishment of quarantine in an area of Suceava County, from which, however, people came out to go to Germany).

This episode has been analyzed from many points of view, including as an indicator of existing social inequalities at European level, or as an example of dysfunction in terms of how the rules are followed / their compliance is ensured by the authorities. At the same time, it is expected that a significant number of individuals will no longer be willing to engage in such an occupational trajectory for fear of health hazards, and others will no longer have access to it (declining job supply, restricted mobility) (Icociu, et al., 2019a).

Regarding the integration of Romanian migrants on the labor market in the four destination states, the type of economic sectors differs from one country to another and therefore the risk of unemployment varies in the four states. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO 2020), seven economic sectors have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, sales, retail and car repair, industry, the real estate market, various administrative activities and support services, hotels and catering, transport and storage, art, recreation and other services. According to OECD estimates, the largest share of Romanian migrants working in economic sectors severely affected by the pandemic is in Germany, with 57.9% of diaspora members in this country being vulnerable to the crisis.

Conclusions

Based on what is presented in this section, some conclusions can be drawn regarding the cross-border mobility of the mobility diaspora and its degree of vulnerability in the context of the COVID pandemic. Although it is not possible to give a sharp answer regarding the return to the country of the members of

the mobility diaspora, as a result of the medical and economic crisis, some ideas related to their situation can be drawn (Plante, & Patel, 2019). The COVID crisis generated an increase in inflows into the country, compared to outflows, an increase that was transitory and lasted about a month (March 11 - April 8). During this period, in addition to those who were abroad for short periods of time for personal, professional or medical reasons, seasonal workers whose contracts were terminated or suspended due to the state of emergency returned to the country, as well as those who were in a situation of accentuated precariousness in the destination country and who, with the loss of their job, were left without means of subsistence. This return trend ended with the departure of seasonal workers to Germany and the Netherlands.

In the case of long-term migrants, the vulnerability to the economic crisis differs from one country of residence to another, the variations being largely determined by the level of education, the type of employment and the economic sector in which they worked. The high share of employment without a contract, in the informal labor market, or in fixed-term or part-time employment puts many members of the Italian diaspora in a situation of high risk of poverty and social exclusion (Gheorghe, 2012). To these are added the low educational capital of many of the members of this diaspora. In the case of Spain, the risks are more limited due to the high formal employment among Romanians there, but the lower educational stock is a factor that increases the degree of exposure to the risk of poverty.

The German diaspora is at high risk due to the overwhelming involvement of its members in economic sectors affected by the crisis. However, the fact that involvement in the informal labor market is limited reduces the risk of poverty and exclusion (Gheorghe, 2017) in the case of the Romanian community in Germany, technical unemployment being accompanied by social protection measures similar to those enjoyed by German citizens (Knieps, 2020). It is difficult to estimate whether the mobility diaspora will decide to return to the country, to remigrate or to remain in the current state of residence. This will depend on when and how each country of residence will overcome the medical and economic crisis and how attractive Romania could become as an offer for members of the diaspora facing economic and health risks.

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