

The Impact of Parents' Work Migration on the Social, Communication and Educational Experiences of Left-Behind Adolescents

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Parental work migration can pose important risks for adolescents, such as joining inappropriate peer-groups, poor results in education or school drop-out. It can also facilitate positive changes in young people's behaviour, as many become aware of the sacrifices their parents make to provide them with a better lifestyle and education and behave responsibly in return. Given that the literature highlights both negative and positive transformations related to parents' migration, our aim is to address the impact of migration on adolescents left behind in rural Romania from their own perspective. We focus on teenagers' experiences of separation from their mother, father or both, in different situations (family life, communication and relationships, caring and concern for others, school achievements, future migration plans). Young people's agency – their capacity to self-educate and organise themselves to perform well at school and in everyday activities following parental migration – is less studied in Romania. Thus, in addition to making the reality of these adolescents better known, our approach provides information that can be turned into policy solutions aimed at improving their life quality.

Keywords: parental work migration, school performance, learning agency, new communication technologies, Romanian migrants, transnational families

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Introduction

In recent years, the migration of temporary labour, whether skilled or unskilled, has led to one of the most dramatic population shifts in Eastern Europe. Countries such as Romania, Ukraine and Poland have some of the largest migrant populations in the region (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021) and the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict seems to further deepen existing migration trends and flows. Our paper focuses on the Romanian diaspora, which exploded after 2014 when the borders of the EU countries' labour markets were opened for the Romanian labour force (Beciu, Ciocea, Mădroane and Cârlan 2018) and explores the consequences of parental migration on adolescents left at home.

One of the major consequences of the massive out-migration of Romanians is that a significant percentage of children have grown up without the irreplaceable support of their parents (Iancu 2013; Onu, Pop, Chiriacescu, Preda and Roman 2019). According to official statistics, the total number of children whose parents work abroad is estimated at between tens of thousands (National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption 2021) and hundreds of thousands (Save the Children Romania 2020; Toth, Toth, Voicu and Ștefănescu 2007). Many of them come from families where both parents are away or where the sole breadwinner is away. They are often left in the care of relatives (grandparents, uncles, aunts) or a guardian (foster carer, neighbour), but there are also cases where they are left on their own or placed in foster care (National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption 2019; Tomșa 2011). The vast majority of these children live in regions with high unemployment rates, especially in the north-east and south-west of the country and most come from rural areas (Bălțeanu et al. 2018).

Based on these realities and hypothesising that work migration inevitably leads to multiple changes that affect families' lifestyle, life quality, communication, relationships, etc., our study discusses some of the main transformations generated by parental migration from the adolescents' own standpoint. This perspective is less common in the Romanian academic literature, which tends to devote more attention to migrant narratives than to the perceptions and experiences of the children left behind. Our main focus is on the relationship between the 'missing' parent(s) and the adolescent and on how this personal, intimate relationship is reshaped by physical distance, new communication technologies and all the new realities that the teenager often has to confront alone. In line with prior studies (Kay and Trevena 2018; Safta, Stan, Iurea and Suditu 2014; Sharma, Devkota and Acharya 2021) and considering the long-term changes in its structure, dynamics and functionality, we argue that the family is the first institution affected by labour migration. Adolescents who are in a situation where one or both of their parents work(s) abroad remain, however, the most vulnerable category in the whole process and their cases should be carefully documented for a deeper understanding of this life-changing experience and of how the negative consequences emerging from it could be limited in the future.

We begin by providing contextual information on the migration phenomenon in Romania. Second, we elaborate on the implications that the parents' decision to work abroad has on their offspring left at home in terms of communication, relationships and school performance. We then present the methodology and discuss the empirical findings. Beyond results that validate or reinforce what we already know from other studies, we emphasise a key finding on how parental migration appears to shape adolescents' aspirations for their future career and migration plans. Next, we emphasise the gender dimension (in terms of both the parent(s) who migrated – mother, father or both – and the gender of the child left behind) and the resulting particularities. We also show how constant communication between transnational family members, facilitated by new technologies and devices, helps teenagers maintain or even improve their school performance after parental migration. Finally, we draw conclusions and offer some evidence-based recommendations for policy-makers.

Migration in Romania: an overview

In Romania, transnational migration expanded considerably after the country's accession to the EU in 2007 and became a consolidated trend in the years that followed. Migration is a major cause of demographic decline, contributing decisively to Romania's population decrease in the last decade (National Institute of Statistics 2020). With the opportunities offered by the labour market in Western Europe, migration has become an attractive solution for many Romanians, whether skilled or unskilled. Those who leave are both employable and subject to high potential fertility (Bălțeanu, Moldoveanu, Ichim and Dobrescu 2018).

Recent data from the Statistical Office of the European Commission (2021) show that more than 20 per cent of Romanian working people aged 20–64 live in different EU countries. In most cases, the decision to migrate (especially to Western Europe) was mainly driven by political, economic and social reasons. Research shows that the majority of Romanians are disappointed with the political system in Romania, corruption in the business sector and poor conditions in the healthcare system (Gherghina, Plopeanu and Necula 2020; Iancu 2013). The lack of jobs and of opportunities for advancement, the low wages compared to the workload or to an individual's own specialisation make up another set of grievances that contribute to Romanians' decision to emigrate (Save the Children Romania 2020; Tomșa 2011). Besides these *push* factors, there are also *pull* factors, which include policies and institutional models put in place in the host country and which add to the reasons why people choose a particular country – e.g., the living environment, better working conditions, financial security, development opportunities (Bălan and Olteanu 2017; Goschin, Roman and Danciu 2013). Thus, whether they have a better or a poorer material condition, come from rural or urban areas and have secondary or higher education, Romanians express similar motivations for leaving the country (National Institute of Statistics 2020). However, much remains to be understood about how the left-behind children perceive these motivations, relate to them and feel they are affected by them – this is one of the main issues that our research addresses (RQ1). Beyond the reasons why people leave, the literature documents both the advantages and the disadvantages of migration, presenting positive prospects – e.g., cooperation, development through remittances, diversity, tolerance, economic growth and mobility (Gherghina *et al.* 2020; Mădroane 2015; Sandu 2016) – alongside negative effects such as racism, discrimination, social marginalisation, poverty and human trafficking (Pascoal and Schwartz 2018; Tomșa and Jenaro 2015). The benefits of migration include lower unemployment, improved interstate relations, a better quality of life for both the migrant and their family, a change in worldview and greater self-confidence (Iancu 2013; Pirwitz 2019; Toth *et al.* 2007). Among the challenges, the most important are economic and social, such as the exodus of high-skilled people, labour shortages, population decline, family separation, trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labour (Docquier and Rapoport 2012; Moroșanu, Bulat, Mazzilli and King 2019). Of the many problems that can be triggered by parents' migration, this paper will explore two main dimensions: how the left-behind adolescents develop and reshape their interaction and relationships with others (RQ2); and how parental migration affects adolescents' school experiences and their subsequent migration plans (RQ3). None of these issues have been addressed recently in the Romanian academic literature, which lacks up-to-date qualitative studies highlighting adolescents' experiences and perceptions of their parents' work migration.

Literature review

Transnational families and ties: communication and relationships after parents' migration

Parents' decision to work abroad is driven by the desire to improve the family's economic situation and to give their children more opportunities to study and create a better future (Sime 2018). However, once the decision

to emigrate is taken (usually at the family level, in consultation with others – see Abrego 2014; Safta *et al.* 2014), and a member leaves to work abroad, there are a number of challenges and drawbacks to the family dynamics.

Emigration data published by the National Institute of Statistics (2020) show that, during 2019, Romanian men emigrated in slightly greater numbers (54.3 per cent) than women (45.7 per cent of total emigration). In most such cases, the mothers take over the responsibilities of both parents (Munteanu and Tudor 2007). However, there are many situations where it is the mother who leaves and her absence is generally shown to be more distressing for the children than that of the father (Abrego 2014; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). This is due not only to the special attachment that children feel towards their mothers but also to the fact that fathers often seem unable to take over all of the mother's responsibilities (Sharma *et al.* 2021).

When both parents decide to work abroad, the children usually stay with their grandparents, who take over the parents' responsibilities. When leaving children with their grandparents is not an option, they are left in the care of more-distant relatives or with older siblings who are only occasionally supervised by an adult. In other cases, children are left alone or placed in foster care (National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption 2019).

These situations can cause numerous problems on a personal and social level in communicating with and relating to others, both close – parents, relatives and friends – and more-distant, such as neighbours, schoolfriends and teachers. The intensity of these problems depends largely on how well-established the relationships between family members were prior to separation, as well as on the relationships which adolescents build with their carers (Jingzhong and Lu 2011). After the migration episode, these relationships may either suffer a level of degradation or, instead, may strengthen. Depending on how strong the relationships between parents and children remain or become after migration, the relationships that those children left at home build with close and distant others are also influenced (Boroşanu and David-Rus 2019; Tomşa and Jenaro 2015; Valtolina and Colombo 2012). Apparently, being motherlessness has a stronger effect than being fatherlessness on teenagers – especially girls, who become more isolated from others and tend to have a harder time communicating with friends, peers and teachers at school (Abrego 2014). However, in some situations the father manages to restore a balance after the mother's departure by cultivating an open relationship with the children. When both parents are away, poor communication makes children feel lonely, abandoned, unmotivated and disoriented. Thus, between parents who left and children who stayed, an open relationship based on understanding and support for the difficulties the latter face at this age, as well as control over their school performance, are essential for their development.

Research shows that the evolution of technology and the rapid access to the internet play a particularly important role in maintaining and strengthening relationships between contemporary transnational family members. Alinejad (2021) illustrates how social media networks facilitate communication between Romanian migrants and left-behind family, shaping relations of 'long-distance emotional care'. Through video calls or real-time photo-sharing, media platforms succeed in transforming transnational care into a mediated emotional experience, where 'care is not merely transferred but felt through mediation' (2021: 444). Social platforms are part of the daily routine of transnational family members and play an essential part in conveying emotional intimacy (Acerdera, Yeoh and Asis 2018; Nedelcu 2017). Thus, very often, transnational family relationships in the digital age are described in terms of 'digital kinning' (Baldassar and Wilding 2020) and 'careful co-presence' (Alinejad 2019), where 'doing family' digitally includes maintaining the social roles (mother's role, father's role) imposed by societal norms.

We argue that, despite geographical distance and the rare occasions when members of a transnational family are physically reunited, *open, constant* and *in-depth communication* between migrant(s) and the left-behind can be truly effective in keeping family ties and relationships alive. In this respect, new technologies and

communication devices bring family members ‘together’ at the end of almost every day. Being in the same virtual room with loved ones, talking about the day’s little events, seeing their reactions and deciphering their body language in real time is no small feat when the family has to live separately.

Parents’ work migration and children’s school experience

Adolescents whose parents migrated to work show several types of behaviour in terms of school performance, so it is hard to find a common point on this specific topic. Sometimes, their learning outcomes improve as they become more aware of the role of education in their personal and professional development. Children take their studies seriously (despite their parents not being there to constantly supervise them) because they value the contribution that education makes to building quality interpersonal relationships (Fiore 2022). Some teenagers are aware of the sacrifices which their parents make to provide them with a better lifestyle and education, so they reciprocate with good educational results. This ability of adolescents to self-educate and organise themselves in order to achieve satisfactory educational outcomes is defined in the literature as young people’s learning agency. Agency is the expression of a person’s power over their environment, their actions/decisions related to their own existential journey. Learning agency refers to the ability of people to exhibit a higher level of academic investment, motivation, involvement and participation, leading to more-positive educational experiences and achievements (Margolius, Doyle, Hynes, Flanagan and Jones 2021).

Other studies show that family breakdown due to migration can make children feel abandoned, leading to their disinterest in learning (Tomşa and Jenaro 2015; Toth *et al.* 2007). There are also studies that report aggression or irritability in adolescents from families separated by migration processes, who became more apathetic and reluctant to interact with their peers or to actively participate in class (Antman 2012; Fiore 2022). Hence, following the emigration of one or both parents, teenagers may adopt deviant behaviours that could negatively affect their learning outcomes.

School results are also influenced by the multiple responsibilities which children take on after their parents’ migration (Jin, Chen, Sun and Liu 2020; Munteanu and Tudor 2007; Save the Children Romania 2020). In cases where younger siblings remain in the care of older ones (occasionally supervised by an adult), the latter assume the role of parents to the former. Beyond household chores that include cooking, cleaning and shopping, older siblings make sure the younger ones go to school, help them to prepare their homework and even attend parent–teacher meetings. Very often, the fact that caring for younger siblings remains their responsibility makes them more concerned with perfecting this new role than with their own social development or education (Amuedo-Dorantes, Georges and Pozo 2010). Moreover, some feel that fulfilling these tasks is more of a duty to their parents; thus, in addition to education, they are deprived of play or rest.

With all this in mind, we argue that, when children truly understand (the need for) and support parental migration, they will be more responsible and act more maturely when departure occurs. This means, among other things, taking their studies seriously, maintaining/improving their academic performance and planning their career carefully. When children are not consulted or are left completely out of discussions and decisions preparing the departure of one/both parents (either because they are too young or because relations between family members are not close, etc.), they will tend to feel disoriented and confused, which will most probably lead to them neglecting school, getting poor grades, skipping classes, etc. Once again, we believe that true *communication* between family members, both before and, particularly, after parental migration, can limit the negative impact of the latter, especially on children’s education and their relationship with school.

Methodology

To understand adolescents' perceptions of both the benefits and risks of belonging to a transnational family, we conducted in-depth interviews with 21 adolescents aged 16–18 years from rural Oltenia, a region in south-western Romania that ranks second in statistics on the places of origin of left-behind children. The interviews were designed as informal semi-structured conversations and, given the Covid-19 pandemic, were conducted via Zoom between March 2021 and April 2022. They included open-ended questions on a variety of topics, from everyday life and its challenges, to specific issues derived from the research objectives. Life stories, opinions and personal accounts were encouraged as we were interested to learn as much as possible about the unique reality of these adolescents, as perceived by them and described in their own words.

There were three main research questions that guided this study:

RQ1: What are adolescents' perceptions of the reasons behind their parents' decision to migrate?

RQ2: How do adolescents communicate and maintain relationships with other people, both in their close and their distant circle, following the parental migration?

RQ3: What are teenagers' perceptions of the effects of parental migration on their school experience and outcomes?

The first question was designed to capture how adolescents relate to their parents' decision to migrate for work (whether or not they were consulted/told why this decision was taken, whether they understand and support it or, rather, question or oppose it). We focused on adolescents' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages arising from this decision, as well as the new responsibilities and tasks which they had to take on. The second question aimed to capture how these young people connected and developed relationships with those around them, both family members or people less close to them. We paid attention to the role of technology in this process and explored the extent to which the use of different devices and platforms succeeded in bridging the gap between those who left and those who stayed. The final question addressed adolescents' educational experiences as they perceive them. We asked them about peers and teachers, favourite subjects and best school achievements, challenges and problems. We also asked them about their future career plans and their intentions to migrate.

The selection of the participants was conditioned by several criteria: belonging to a transnational family with at least one parent working abroad (temporarily or long-term), for at least five years; living in a rural area that tops the statistics on parental out-migration; being at least 16 years old (at that age, teenagers are better able to formulate detailed, coherent answers in line with their real situation). Suitable people for the research sample were identified in a village in the south of Oltenia, where almost every family has someone working abroad. We selected interviewees who subsequently recommended other relevant contacts, using the snowball technique. At the end of this process, we had interviewed 21 adolescents (10 boys and 11 girls) with one or both parents away. Written informed parental consent was obtained for all interviewees under the age of 18. Both parents and adolescents were informed of the purpose and objectives of the research and we insisted that their participation is voluntary and not incentivised in any way. They were also assured that their privacy and confidentiality would be respected, and their names changed to preserve anonymity.

As the topics we tried to uncover are quite sensitive, we paid particular attention to the wording of our questions. We also asked interviewees to tell us as much as they felt comfortable with, to stop at any time or to skip questions which they did not feel ready to answer. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes each, were audio-recorded and transcribed for accurate analysis and interpretation of the data. Field notes were maintained by the researchers to complement the recordings. After a detailed review of the transcriptions, an

interpretive content analysis followed. The main themes addressed in the interviews were organised into relevant categories (combining similar elements and maintaining a constant comparison of the data both within and between the participants) according to the directions/topics emerging from the research questions and objectives. The qualitative analysis of the data reflected the three major themes that are relevant to the present discussion and are detailed below.

Findings and discussion

Parents' decision to emigrate as seen by their adolescent offspring

Most of the existing research devoted to labour migration from Romania has focused on mechanisms, economic and demographic consequences or motives of this phenomenon, often from the migrants' standpoint. Our aim is to add a new perspective – that provided by the adolescents left at home – on the reasons that contribute to Romanians' decision to migrate. Our findings document two main reasons behind parental work migration as perceived by the teenagers: the precarious financial situation of the family and the lack of job opportunities in Romania:

(...) they left for financial reasons, because I had to pay rent during my high school years and they couldn't afford it. (Ruxandra, 16, f).

The reasons behind my father's departure are crystal clear for me... I understand them well. He tried to make a good decision for all of us, he sacrificed his life. (...) And he still wants what's best for us, that's why he's still there (Robert, 16, m).

Consistent with previous research (Abrego 2014; Munteanu and Tudor 2007), our results show that the decision to emigrate was generally made by all family members (adolescents were also consulted whenever possible) and was motivated in terms of a better life, often understood as free from financial worries. Most interviewees who were over 10 years old when their parents left reported that they understood and supported them in this process from the beginning. This was particularly the case if the father was the one who migrated and the child/children stayed with their mothers. Nevertheless, interviewees who were very young when their parents migrated said that, initially, they neither understood nor agreed with their parents' leaving but, as they grew older and their needs increased, the purpose of this arrangement became clearer:

When I was younger I used to suffer a lot and I was upset, but now I'm beginning to understand them. If I were in their shoes, I would certainly do the same (Radu, 18, m).

Based on our findings, we argue that the adolescents' age at the time of their parents' departure may be crucial for them to both understand the situation in depth and to better manage the difficulties arising from it. Whether the father, mother or both migrated is also of paramount importance for how teenagers cope with the new context. When both parents – and especially when mothers leave – to provide for their families, most interviewees find it hard to accept the situation, no matter how fully they seem to understand what motivates it:

I think she should have stayed with me at least until I finished secondary school... I think that would have made it easier for me to accept it. But as things were... her absence became pretty painful. I missed her warmth, I missed her altogether, and I think that made me want to take over as much of what she was doing at home as possible... I agreed to do everything she did so that she wouldn't be missed... (Ana-Maria, 18, f).

Even if most adolescents understood and approved their parents' decision, they described the new context in terms of both advantages and disadvantages. Interestingly, when asked about the main benefits of their parents' migration to work, many teenagers did not mention money primarily but tended to emphasise greater freedom and fewer constraints:

The biggest advantage was that I wasn't restricted in the ways some of my friends were (Adi, 18, m).

I could do what I wanted much more easily without having to ask for my mother's or father's permission (Denisa, 17, f).

This may have to do with the fact that, in adolescence, people value particularly the lack of adult control and the independence and freedom to make their own decisions (Boroşanu and David-Rus 2019). The financial situation, which improved significantly for all family members, was ranked second by most of the teenagers when describing the best parts of their parents' migration. They talked about schooling at renowned high schools, better education prospects, a higher standard of living, housing renovation:

The biggest advantage is that I was able to attend a better high school. This way, I can prepare myself for a career... Without her support, without the money she sent me, I wouldn't be able to pursue these things. If my mother hadn't left, we'd never be where we are now (Lili, 18, f).

Adolescents learn that they can manage quite well on their own and make their own plans and decisions. Among others, the household responsibilities that fall to teenagers after their parents migrate provide a perfect context for them to show agency, power, and involvement:

You learn that you can live without a parent, you can make it (...). I learned to cook my own food, wash my own clothes, clean the house... I've educated myself in a way... I learned to do more things on my own, to take care of myself and the house.... (Ciprian, 17, m).

In terms of downsides, the emotional cost of migration topped the young people's lists, and many reported feelings of loneliness and longing, a constant need for support and for the protective physical presence of the parents:

I can't deny the fact that I feel lonely (even though I live with my grandmother)... that I miss them, but I try not to be selfish (Ruxandra, 16, f).

I wish I could talk to her anytime, I wish I knew she was home... I'd like to have someone waiting for me when I come back from school... I miss everything when she's not there... (Adi, 18, m).

Very few interviewees said that, if they had been in their parents' shoes, before they thought of leaving the country, they would have done their best to find a better job in Romania. These responses came mainly from

teenagers who were very young when the family was separated (4–5 years old) or where the mother was the migrant parent; our findings providing support for what the literature suggests – that children whose mothers have emigrated suffer more from a lack of affection (Abrego 2014; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). In this context, we believe that the development of public policies that make it possible for adolescents to participate in psychological counselling services is essential for their development and well-being. In addition, finding mechanisms to involve them in discussion and support groups made up of people in the same situation as them can be useful in teaching adolescents that they are not alone and that there are many ways to cope.

With respect to the new responsibilities which the teenagers took on after their parents left, our results reflect two main categories of experience. For adolescents with both parents away, the new responsibilities are manifold and often overwhelming, especially when grandparents cannot deal with them alone:

When my grandmother fractured her hand and was hospitalised, I took over all the housework. I always felt tired, I felt like I couldn't do it all. My sister was younger and I had to take care of her schooling too, make sure she did her homework, help her with everything (Daniela, 16, f).

A similar situation was experienced by Ana-Maria who, although she was only 14 when her mother left, was also very involved in housework and caring for her older brothers for whom she cooked, washed clothes, etc. These findings are consistent with those of prior studies (Jin *et al.* 2020; Munteanu and Tudor 2007; Save the Children Romania 2020) which describe the multiple roles and tasks that left-behind adolescents take on, from household chores to parenting younger siblings. This affects their lives to a great extent as it ends up depriving the teenagers of rest and of the opportunity to attend to their priorities, such as studying, playing sports or simply spending more time with their friends. In the case of adolescents with one parent away, our results also align with extant studies showing that, when the mother stayed at home, she took over almost all of the father's parenting responsibilities. In this way, even if the adolescents helped out from time to time, they were more free to focus on their own interests and needs:

I didn't have much to do... basically most of the responsibilities were taken over by my mother and my sister, because she's older than me. (Laurențiu, 16, m).

However, if the stay-at-home parent was the father, the adolescents took on more of the household chores and learned to take care of themselves. Most learned to cook, wash and clean but were eventually glad to have learned to do so as they see it as personal development.

We conclude this section with some mentions of adolescents' choices about their future. Asked about their plans, with very few exceptions, interviewees said that they want to live, study and work in Romania and dream of the moment when their families will be reunited. This outcome may reflect a repressed difficulty in fully accepting and accommodating their parents' decision to work abroad, in the sense that, although rationally they seem to understand and support it to a great extent, emotionally the burden it has caused may be harder to overcome. Thus, teenagers may not want to carry on with this kind of life, where family and loved ones are always far away. As our results show, the hardships they went through in the long years when one or both parents worked abroad made them value ordinary activities, such as time with parents, close family ties, holidays spent together:

I want to finish high school, take my exams, continue my studies and make a life here. I wouldn't like to be away from my loved ones all the time. I see how it is for me and I wouldn't want it to be like that for my family when I have my own family (Denis, 17, m).

However, this reluctance to see themselves migrating for work may be also an effect of the messages they receive from their parents, both explicitly and implicitly. We believe that, with the remittances they send home, parents also 'send' the message that there is no more room for similar sacrifices in the family. In other words, the parents' migration – the ultimate sacrifice for family welfare – would especially make sense if adolescents were not forced to follow in their footsteps. This idea should be tested in further studies.

Communicating and relating to others following parental emigration

Another key theme of our analysis concerns adolescents' communication patterns and networks following parental migration. The focus is primarily on the interaction with the parent(s) who left, the devices used to communicate, the topics addressed, the perceived changes in family dynamics and the redefinition of relationships between family members. Particular attention is paid to how adolescents connected with and related to the people who cared for them in their parents' absence (grandparents, relatives) as well as to other relevant people such as best friends, schoolmates and teachers.

We find that the changes occurring in young people's lives after their parents' departure are multi-layered and complex, ranging from the need to process an entirely new reality and their place in it to premature maturation, the assumption of responsibilities that normally belong to adults, difficulties in making decisions when they have no one to turn to for advice or guidance and the habit of being on their own from an early age. Life away from parents often brought with it feelings of insecurity and injustice; new situations that adolescents did not know how to react to also added to their doubts and anxieties.

The most affected were those adolescents who had both parents or the sole supporting parent abroad and who were visited about once a year. Those who were left behind at a very young age (during pre-school/primary-school years) and those who have their mothers away tend to perceive their parents as strangers or distant friends whom they discover more with every new encounter. In such cases, as other studies show (Toth *et al.* 2007), the relationship between the teenagers and their grandparents is redefined in the sense that the latter are perceived as parents, as the real caregivers and as the most important people in the world:

Unfortunately, not all children are lucky enough to have grandparents like mine, who are extraordinary people, from whom I had and always have something to learn (Maria, 18, f).

Teenagers who feel truly connected to their grandparents do whatever they can to help them, taking on roles and responsibilities to make their life easier:

After my parents left, my younger sister and I remained in the care of our grandmother, but I felt I had to get involved and support my grandmother, especially with regards to my sister. My only responsibility was to help my grandmother and sister to not miss our parents. I mean, I tried to give my sister more support and affection... so that she would miss our parents less (Daniela, 16, f).

In other cases, despite the close ties with their grandparents, teenagers push the limits and take advantage of a greater lack of control and boundaries on their part. While finding this approach advantageous and liberating at the time, adolescents have also understood that it caused them problems, particularly in terms of poor school performance. This result is in line with previous research showing that the physical absence of the parent decreases the likelihood of boundary enforcement and influence over children (Gonța 2007; Valtolina and Colombo 2012).

Some of the adolescents with both parents away talked about a constant need for validation, for connection and appreciation – ‘I strive to have people around me and I put a lot of effort and energy into having friends around me’ (Ionuț, 18, m). Most of the time they remain quiet in friendship groups, avoid sharing their thoughts and feelings for fear of being judged; some tend to spend most of their time isolated from the rest of the group. This manifestation is less visible in adolescents who have only one parent away, especially the father. On the other hand, those who have turned to others more confidently when they needed help and were supported by friends, neighbours, close relatives or teachers, are more open to communicating and investing in relationships with others:

My friends are my family. I always talk to them if I'm in a bad mood. I go and sleep over at my girlfriends, spend time with them and their parents... (Andreea, 17, f).

In terms of communication with the missing parent(s), our results align with current research (Acerdera *et al.* 2018; Alinejad 2021; Nedelcu 2017) showing that new technologies and platforms play a major role in reducing physical distance and bringing family members together, even if mainly on a screen or in a virtual room. As our interviewees say, they are one (phone) call away from their parents, and social networks like Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp are most helpful (also due to their accessibility and low cost) when it comes to getting in touch with each other. Laurențiu (16, m), for example, appreciated more the benefits of the new communication platforms and devices in his relationship with his migrant parent when he was told about how Gabi, his older sister, in the absence of smartphones and Internet access, communicated with her father through letters and photos taken on special occasions:

Connecting online and seeing each other through social media is very important. And the proof is in what my sister experienced when she was little and my dad was away. (...) I've seen touching letters and her dictating to my mum what to say to my dad... Mum would send dad printed pictures so he could see how Gabi [his sister] was growing up, what she had done on several occasions, what she had invented. They told me that when they talked on the phone they almost counted their words because it cost quite a lot. My sister used to tell me that she would get a shock when she saw my father face to face, and he was always amazed by how much she grew from one encounter to the next (Laurențiu, 16, m).

As useful and practical as it is, modern technology does not replace hugs or physical touch: ‘My mother tries very hard to make me not miss them too much, but internet chats are not the same as when I have them next to me. I mean, I want them to kiss me, hug me, comfort me, especially when I'm having a bad day’ (Andreea, 17, f). Some teenagers insisted that the absence of a parent or a relationship, small gestures, small routines (e.g., ‘decorating the Christmas tree with dad’), a genuine conversation or simple activities (e.g. going to the cinema, attending end-of-school-year celebrations together) cannot be substituted by unlimited access to the internet and modern applications. In this regard, they pointed out the superficiality of some of the conversations they have with their parents on WhatsApp or Messenger. These mostly boil down to banal discussions about whether and what they ate, how they slept, how school went (often without much detail):

I don't 'communicate' with my parents, but we talk, I write, they write back. Mummy tries to talk to me. I'm the problem, because I don't communicate. I don't talk to her often, I don't call her when I have something to say, I don't even ask her how she is, if she's well or not. And maybe I'll regret it because I care a lot about Mummy, but I don't show it to her. I don't know how to show it (Daiana, 18, f).

To sum up, despite being grateful that they can keep in touch with each other through technology, for many interviewees truly authentic communication occurs when their parents come home for the holidays. That is when the family gets together and everything is perfect, as teenagers say. However, they also conclude that, even when the parents are at home, after the first truly intense days together, things and discussions become diluted and routine and banal conversations emerge. For many interviewees, this seems another way of telling themselves that geographical distance is not the biggest obstacle to maintaining close family relationships. As can be seen from their responses, when there is constant, open and honest communication between family members, the negative effects of physical separation can be more easily mitigated.

The impact of parental migration on adolescents' school experience

On the whole, adolescents understand the sacrifices that parents make for the wellbeing of the family and their future in particular. Thus, they feel motivated to perform well at school, not only as a form of gratitude to their parents but also as the only chance to overcome their condition:

I study the same as before, I do my best to keep my grades up, to get a scholarship because I know that my parents left to give me a better future and I don't want to let them down (Ruxandra, 18, f).

This approach to education provides a context for young people to express high levels of (learning) agency and demonstrates a mature and healthy behaviour that is also reflected in previous studies (Boroşanu and David-Rus 2019, etc.) which show that, in some cases, teenagers' learning outcomes improve after their parents' migration, as the young people become more responsible. Relatedly, our results show that most adolescents who understand (the need for) and support parental migration decide to continue their studies or activities when this occurs. Most of them have medium- and long-term plans for future studies and career paths (notable exceptions are those who were very young when the families were separated and those whose mother is away and the father is quite cold and distant). A key aspect that our study documents is that daily communication and close contact between teenagers and their migrated parent(s) helps them all to stay anchored in a present which is not always easy to accept but which is seen as a necessary sacrifice for a brighter future. Constant and open communication between family members who are separated by migration is always a good bet, as it helps everyone to cope better with the new situations and challenges and has a positive impact on adolescents' academic performance and achievement.

Similarly, the relationship between parents and teachers (easily maintained with instant communication devices) can mediate adolescents' academic progress, leading them to take their educational responsibilities more seriously. The parents' involvement in their teenagers' schooling, even from a distance, appears to increase the academic engagement and outcomes. Positive effects on the school performance of adolescents can also be generated by a strong bond between teenagers and teachers, cultivated and maintained through open communication, constant support and encouragement from teachers and appropriate teacher behaviour that arouses students' admiration: 'The geography teacher is my favourite, because she is fair, even if she is quite demanding' (Daiana, 18, f). In this context, we can speak of a transfer of parental authority, with teachers becoming role models for their students. In the absence of parents to validate adolescents' academic achievements, teachers and mentors are often invested with the confidence that they can guide the teenagers' steps in the same way that their parents would: 'Especially now, during my last year of high school, I really needed someone to guide me and I can say that I have a teacher who is always by my side and to whom I am very grateful for her help' (Eli, 17, f). Emotional closeness to teachers, especially for those adolescents with absent mothers, can have a positive impact on the young people's confidence to develop personal discussions

on sensitive issues in search of viable solutions to them. Older siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles can also contribute substantially to the educational process, for similar reasons to those discussed above.

On a different note, some interviewees admitted that, following their parents' migration, their school results deteriorated. Explanations for this were varied. Some spoke of a lack of motivation to manage their time effectively or to learn. Accustomed to having their daily activities organised and carried out with other family members, teenagers felt disoriented and confused after their parents left. Consequently, school fell out of the sphere of their immediate priorities. Other blamed their poor learning performance on a lack of support from absent parents who managed to supervise their educational progress only when they were at home:

Maybe I would have gotten a higher GPA if they had stayed to help me when I had questions... My dad used to help me with my physics homework and my mum with French (Radu, 18, m).

Some students left the impression that they were always looking for excuses to hide their lack of motivation and low interest in educational performance, already visible before their parents left. For others, too much freedom has left school behind: 'I have a lot of freedom, no one controls me, and I can't figure out how to manage my time effectively to learn. I need someone to sit next to me, check up on me and ask me why I'm not studying' (Ionuț, 18, m). Other interviewees admitted that they skipped classes more often since their parents have been away: 'My school situation is neither good nor bad. Now, with online school, I've skipped some classes because I find it hard to get up... My mum would have probably woken me up earlier in the morning' (Ciprian, 17, m). In line with other studies (Boroșanu and David-Rus 2019; Tomșa and Jenaro 2015; Toth *et al.* 2007), our research illustrates that a lack of rules to follow often means acting without direction and constantly testing the ground to learn right from wrong. From this we can conclude that the role of the parent, both in education and in other areas, is fundamental and that self-discipline, in order to be properly cultivated, must be tested through experiences that impose safe limits.

Conclusion and limitations of the study

There is no doubt that, after their parents' labour migration, adolescents go through a life-changing experience. While there are upsides to this process that most people would not get from working in Romania, the emotional costs of separating teenagers from one or both of their parents are impossible to avoid or ever compensate for. In this paper, we did not seek to discuss parents' decision to migrate for work, nor did we try to suggest solutions for them to stop looking for jobs abroad. Given Romania's ongoing economic challenges, for many of these people who have spent years trying to find alternatives to migration, this would be illusory. Our goal was to get a deeper understanding of the reality of the left-behind adolescents, in order to be able to suggest ways that could limit the negative consequences emerging from it in the future.

The in-depth interviews we conducted in the pursuit of our objectives revealed many interesting findings, the most significant of which we summarise below. A first important take-away from this research is that, as they get older, teenagers are more likely to understand and cope with their parents' decision to migrate, appreciating the increased freedom and material benefits that facilitate a better life and improved educational opportunities for them. Another important finding is that parental migration appears to shape adolescents' own aspirations for future careers and migration plans. Exploring how teenagers see their future reveals their hopes of succeeding in Romania through education, which can offer better prospects than their parents had. These perspectives and the fact that most interviewees do not want to start a transnational family in the future may be due to the difficulties and challenges of living away from their own parents. A further key aspect highlights the very active transnational family life, where communication and close ties are maintained especially with

the help of new communication technologies and devices. Although modern technology does not replace physical contact, it does reduce physical distance and mediates long-distance emotional care. Finally, parental out-migration can also trigger positive outcomes for our participants, who tend to show a high level of learning agency and a mature and responsible attitude towards school. Taking their studies seriously means both a better career path and a chance to re-pay the sacrifices their parents made.

The adolescents left behind by migrant parents are a group that unfortunately will not disappear in the near future, so we argue that policy-makers should take this as a starting point when implementing measures to improve the teenagers' lifestyle and quality of life. Certainly, trying to keep parents at home by stimulating a competitive and rewarding labour market at the national level is a priority. Until then, however, the immediate reality is that, in Romania, there are tens or even hundreds of thousands of children who live daily without their parents and who must be helped, through relevant public policies, to cope more easily with this situation. First (and consistent with other scholars' recommendations – see Pascoal and Schwartz 2018; Safta *et al.* 2014; Tomşa and Jenaro 2015), we believe that parents who decide to work abroad should inform the local authorities of their intention and provide additional information about those in whose care the adolescents remain. Currently, parents are not obliged to declare their departure from the country for more than three months, which may have an impact on the correct collection of records of left-behind children, whose number in Romania varies greatly depending on the organisation collecting the data. For instance, while the most recent statistics released by the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption (2021) show that, in Romania, there are about 73,387 children left at home by their migrant parents, other studies (Save the Children Romania 2020) provide much higher and deeply concerning numbers (e.g. 300,000 or more). These statistical and policy gaps would likely not be so severe if there was a nationwide system for registering all children whose parents work abroad.

Second, we argue that the educational outcomes of children left behind by their migrant parents should remain a serious concern for both those around them (parents, carers, teachers, etc.) and the state. Although, as our research shows, some adolescents may not fully understand the role of school in their lives, the parents are too far away to exercise authority and the caregivers are too old or too busy with the day-to-day care of these adolescents, we argue that the state has a duty to fund programmes that foster academic interest and achievement. These may include training programmes for teachers to improve their skills to support left-behind children as well as financial/other incentives for teachers who are willing to work overtime to help the adolescents to avoid falling behind and dropping out after parental migration. Third, in line with previous research (Onu *et al.* 2019), we argue that the state should adequately fund social assistance services that design and implement measures aimed at improving adolescents' emotional wellbeing and quality of life.

Like any other qualitative paper, ours also comes with limitations. Among the most important, the small sample size does not really allow for a comparative analysis of the gender data together with a comparative and more in-depth analysis of situations where the interviewee has only one parent working abroad, both parents away or the sole supporting parent away. Depending on these cases (which we addressed somewhat tangentially when presenting the data), we could have brought more nuance to the discussion of the impact of parental migration on adolescents left behind. Another important aspect concerns the fact that most of this research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, which made face-to-face interviews impossible. Hence, poor internet connections and other technical issues (e.g., background noise and distractions) may, in some cases, have affected the flow of the discussions and the accuracy of the answers provided via Zoom. The limited number of interviews does not allow us to present an overall picture of migration and its impact through the eyes of the teenagers left at home in rural Romania. Also, the adolescents' responses are self-reported data, reflecting their perceptions at a particular time, in a particular context.

Further research on the topic is definitely needed. In addition to the limitations mentioned above, we believe that future studies should take into account, in both qualitative and quantitative surveys, the length of time that the children and their parents were separated (in our case it ranged from 4 to 14 years), the age of the children when this occurred, the relationship which the child builds with those in whose care he/she has remained, as well as with teachers and peers at school, whether and when parents intend to come back and whether and why children (do not) consider joining them abroad. All these variables, examined from the perspective of all the actors involved, would contribute to better understanding the challenges faced by young people in transnational families and to finding more effective ways of alleviating them.

Funding

Research for this paper was supported by a grant from the Romanian Ministry of Research and Innovation, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-BSH-2-2016-0005, within PNCDI III.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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How to cite this article: Udrea G., Guiu G. (2022). The Impact of Parents' Work Migration on the Social, Communication and Educational Experiences of Left-Behind Adolescents. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 11(2): 101–117.