

Ana Maria Dima

**THE UNCERTAINTY
OF TRANSNATIONAL PARENTHOOD
AND ANTI-SYSTEM POLITICAL
PREFERENCES**



Presă Universitară Clujeană

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AND ANTI-SYSTEM POLITICAL PREFERENCES

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Introduction¹

Migration is one of the defining phenomena of today's changing world (Castels, De Haas, Miller 2014, Collier 2014). Population movement is a natural historical occurrence, but in our current society it is being heavily politicized and regulated in ways that challenge traditional ways of living. The opposition between people who leave versus those who stay boils down to a dichotomy between traditional lifestyles and life-changing lifestyles part of late modernity, with the latter being more impacted by uncertainty. Major events such as Brexit and the election of President Trump in 2016, have shaken up the world order as known and also led to an increase in illiberalism and far-right discourses, particularly in Western Europe, where the German AfD has noticed a rise in their ranks, or the Italian Fratelli d'Italia's rise to power.

When not confronted with life-threatening events, such as conflicts or natural disasters, people migrate in search of better lives for themselves and their families or to escape poverty and dysfunctional societies (Collier 2014). In the course of migration, the lives of both migrants and their families change, and this is particularly the case with transnational families, especially the nuclear families, that is when one or both parents choose to leave their child behind in the country of origin, while they themselves migrate to a different country. This is an increasing phenomenon, across

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was included in the paper titled Transnational parents, uncertainty and anti-system political preferences published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices issue 2/2025.

continents, with consequences for family life, lifestyles and life prospects, quality of care, but also with implications for political preferences and voting behaviour.

Everything is of particular salience in the case of transnational parents. First, let us note that transnationalism per se is interesting, in the sense that it keeps people, groups, and societies interconnected, such as being in the same time in two or more places (Vertovec, 2009). Second, transnational parents are the ones that live in a place, while part of or all of their children live in another country (Bonizzoni&Boccagni 2013; Carling, Menjivar and Schmalzbauer 2012; Mazzucato&Dito, 2018; Ducu, 2011). Thus, they become an interesting group to study, as they have become a more recent phenomenon who, as diasporic actors, can contribute to shaping political outcomes in their country of origin.

While there are many studies that look at the phenomenon of transnational care between transnational parents and their children or the effects of remittances on children left back home (Bonizzoni&Boccagni 2013; Carling, Menjivar and Schmalzbauer 2012; Mazzucato&Dito, 2018; Ducu, 2011) there are no studies that look into transnational parents' political preferences, based on their status as transnational parents. In this work I posit that there is a positive correlation between transnational parents' state of uncertainty given their family status, and their voting preferences for anti-system parties. In a world fraught with uncertainty transnational parents become or continue to be political actors who express through voting, and not only, their preferences for political elites back in their country of origin. I posit that transnational parenthood and the state of uncertainty it brings shapes parents' anti-system preferences.

In 2016 the scale of migration from Eastern Europe has been described as the largest population loss in modern history², with Romania and Poland at the forefront. According to the 2015 International Migration Report issued by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Romania is

² <http://blogs.ft.com/ftdata/2016/05/27/eastern-europe-has-the-largest-population-loss-in-modern-history/>

second only to Syria in terms of the growth rate of its diaspora between 2000 and 2015, with an annual growth rate of 7.3% per annum within the stated period. Within the EU alone, the main destination for Romanian migrants, Romania can now historically be labelled as “the European country with the largest outflow of migrants, with more than 2 million Romanians registered as residents in other EU countries”. (OECD, Mereuță:2013). A 2014 European study including data from six countries: Denmark, Germany, Italy, Spain, Romania and the UK, identifies a variety of forms of cross-border practices and “transnationalism” in Europe based on the life worlds of the citizens in these countries as characterized by status variables (age, gender, education, socio-professional status, subjective class, and type of cross-bordering). Unsurprisingly Romanian citizens held the highest percentage among all respondents migrating for work reasons and family/related reasons. It is also important to note that the period of mass migration also coincides with two specifically important moments for the EU, marked by Romania’s accession to the EU in 2007 and the financial crisis of 2008, but following thereafter with still high numbers of migrants leaving the country.

While the brief picture provided supports the perspective that looks at migration, at least in its initial stages, as “a life project rather than merely a temporary exposure to another civilisation.”(Nicolaescu, 2015), Romanian migration has been described as primarily “circulatory” (Sandu, 2006, Sandu, 2010). This would contradict the narrative that migrants have indeed been able to access a better life elsewhere, or that they could imagine this life as sustainable. One important change caused by migration has been to the family life of individuals, as already mentioned above. However, the Romanian state has stepped in, with the Romanian President calling in for a taskforce to be established, which would explicitly report on the situation of children left behind by their parents in Romania. This led to the regular submission of reports on the state of the children and an evaluation of the impact of their parents’ departure as well as subsequent measures so that the children may not be too affected by their parents’ absence. This context provides further reason to investigate transnational families and transnational parents specifically, as the state’s interest in the outcome of their departure leaves room for further debate.

Migration of this scale triggers the breakdown of traditional ways of life and impacts all of society's layers, from family life, to labour shortages, to political outcomes, which diaspora voters help shape. This work will bring together several strands of literature to stress the connection between transnational parenthood, uncertainty and political preferences for anti-system parties. Thus, in the first part of the book, I build up the main conceptual entries. They develop somehow separately, like the pieces of a puzzle, to fit each other only after each was fully revealed. In the first chapter, I reaffirm the general conceptual context in which I build my argument. Then, I review the literature in the field of anti-system and populist parties, in the second I look at uncertainty and posit that transnational parenthood is a particular type of uncertainty inducing experience for individuals, and in the third I provide a brief overview of how these two elements are linked. In the third chapter, I cover the main literature in the field of transnational parenthood before going on to provide analysis on the subjects interviewed for this book. As already noted, the work will bring together three theoretical strands on anti-system parties, uncertainty and transnational families, in a bid to link the three phenomena together based on the lived experience and preferences of Romanian transnational parents living in the UK and Germany.

For this study, I take a qualitative approach, by interviewing 10 Romanian transnational parents living in the UK and Germany. These are in-depth online interviews that provide a clear picture of the lived experience of transnational parents. The interviewees were selected online using a snowball selection method, from online Facebook groups of Romanians living abroad in Germany and the UK. The interviews were held online in 2021 and 2022, and although the setting against which these interviews is placed, namely the Covid-19 pandemic compounded the level of uncertainty, I do not explore the impact of the pandemic itself on their political preferences. It is noteworthy to mention that the interviews were held after the parliamentary elections held in Romania in 2020, which captures their most up-to-date preferences at the time.

Lastly, this work brings to light a new perspective: one which looks at transnational parents beyond their immediate role in their family but also as

political actors with preferences and behaviour that are worth investigating and opening up the debate about the different ways in which transnational parents become or stay involved with the politics of their home countries, irrespective of their status as migrants in a different country.

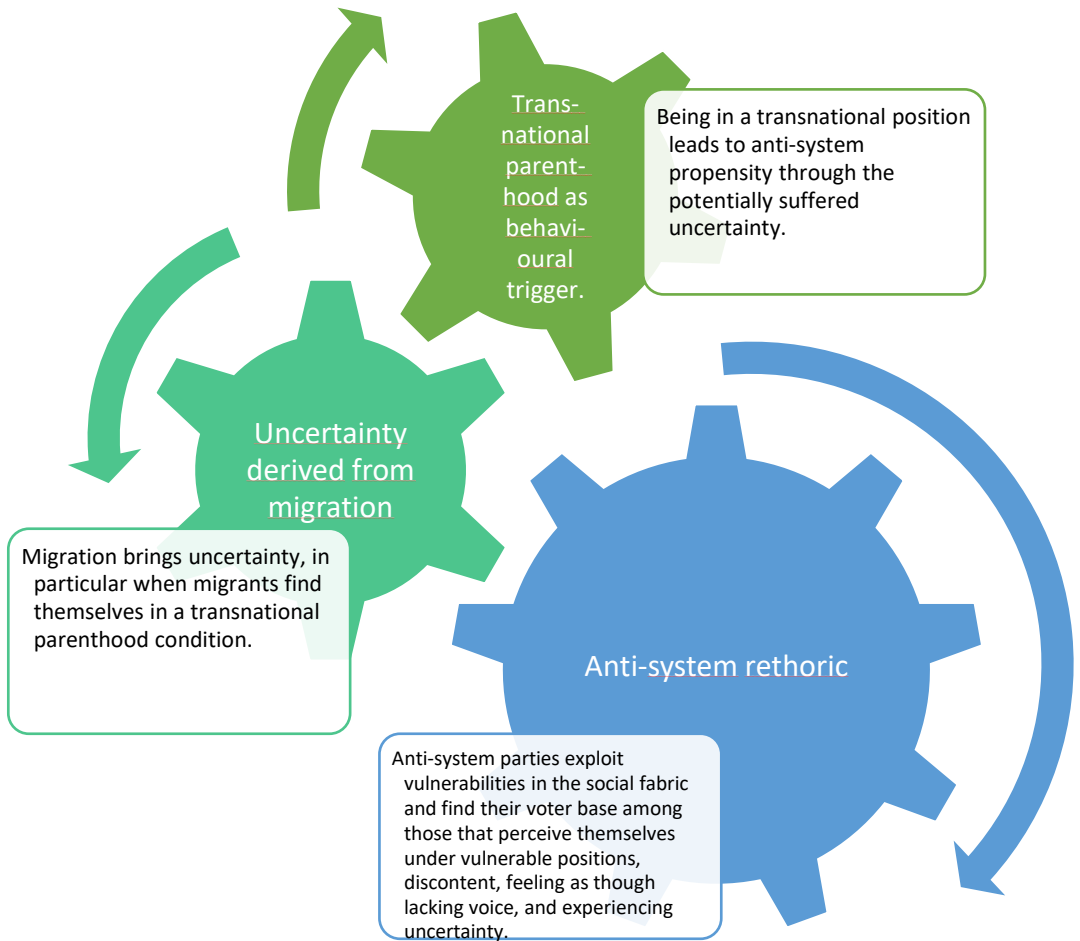
General Conceptual Context

This book builds upon three propositions:

- 1./ Anti-system parties exploit vulnerabilities in the social fabric and find their voter base among those who perceive themselves as living under vulnerable conditions, discontent, feeling as though lacking voice, and experiencing uncertainty.
- 2./ Migration increases uncertainty, particularly when migrants find themselves in a transnational parenthood condition.
- 3./ Being in a transnational position leads to anti-system propensity through the potentially suffered uncertainty.

The first part is already proven in the literature, as I will argue in the following chapter (Zulianello, 2019, de la Torre 2019), the second and the third will be illustrated accordingly.

Figure 1. The three basic propositions



The societal context of these contemporary times is also relevant. I place my research at the beginning of 2020s. The world is shaped by migration and an unprecedented rise in illiberal stances in the post-second world-war Western societies. This short chapter briefly reminds the reader of a few salient elements of the two processes. The aim is not to cover all aspects of the two major phenomena but just to mention the context of the three propositions that represent the backbone of my argument. Migration is one of the most defining elements of today's world (Castles 2010). It is at once one of the most politicized topics and a reality that constantly shapes and reshapes the lives of families and individuals all over the world (Scholten&Verbeek, 2015).

Waves of migration shape our contemporary world (FitzGerald&Arar, 2018). They were triggered by conflict (Czaika&De Haas, 2014), economic needs (Czaika, 2015), the search for a better life uproots individuals (Benson&O'Reilly 2009), while causing anxieties in both countries of origin, who risk losing important numbers of their workforce (Docquier&Rapoport, 2012), as well as in host countries where they are perceived as a threat to established models and institutions, ultimately to cultural norms and ways of being which both define and differentiate one type of society from another (Costelloe, 2008).

One of the most fundamental changes brought about by migration is a change in family composition and dynamics (Booth, Crouter, Landale and Landale, 2012). What was once seen as a rather static and even rigid idea of family, one where most, if not all members were geographically bound to live together or at least in each other's proximity, has now taken on new forms of being. Transnational families, that is families who live across borders, where the individuals of the same family live in at least two different countries, are now becoming a much more common phenomenon (Bonizzoni&Boccagni 2013; Carling, Menjivar and Schmalzbauer 2012; Mazzucato&Dito, 2018). This transformation of family life comes with certain costs to the individual, particularly as it involves a readaptation of one's identity and sense of self, in addition to reimagining life trajectories and constructing narratives that challenge traditional views. Allegiance to one's family tends to override all other forms of an individual's identity. (Mearsheimer, 2019). In the quest for redefining and readjusting to family life from afar, migrants are faced with the need to re-establish family relations in new ways so as to ensure the continuity of their presence and role within the family, even in ways that challenge conventional models of family life.

Migration is a complex experience for individuals, it requires redefining the several layers of the self, social, economic, political including in the realm of family life. Compounded by fundamental changes in one's living conditions, one's identity is also subject to change during the migration process. "Like everyone else, immigrants can take on such multiple identities. But how they balance these identities affects their behaviour." (Collier, 2014, p. 69.)

Migration is primarily a form of escaping social dysfunctionality and poverty (Collier, 2014). This presupposes a state of discontent and dissatisfaction and even outright disappointment with the home country's state of affairs, so that parents are pushed into leaving their children and spouses behind, in an attempt to create a better life.

However, at the time of and after the actual migration, this life is usually wrought with uncertainty about the process and ways in which the migration experience will pan out. This is only complicated even further by the individual's status as a transnational parent, where they have to fight to build ties and forge relationships that are strained by the lack of physical proximity and shared life experience. Based on the above, we can infer that migrants' and particularly transnational parents' political behaviour is also influenced by their condition.

In a life situation characterized by uncertainty, migrants still get to express their political preferences, primarily through voting in their country of origin's elections, but also possibly engaging in other forms of political activity, participating in diaspora groups or attending protests, or enrolling in the diaspora branches of their preferred party. In any case, migrants become political actors, though from afar, who hold views, preferences and ideas about how their home country should be run and who the elites should be.

In the process of accepting a new role and redefining the self, a parent is also likely to express certain political preferences, where diaspora voters have the right to vote in elections, they also "possess the potential to significantly influence the political process" (Gherghina and Farcas, 2024, p. 252). These may go in line with wider trends of migrant voters, with diaspora voting constituting a particular group of voters. Transnational parents constitute a specific sub-group of diasporic voters, one that is faced with additional challenges when compared to "regular migrants" as the former are bound to engage with the political and social challenges of their home country much more, given their involvement in family life back home. Nevertheless, other migrants keep in touch with their society and family of origin, but generally speaking the relations in the nuclear family are stronger than in the extended family. This means that transnational parenthood is likely to lead to closer ties to the family left behind, than other degrees of familial ties.

If anything, it could be argued that depending on the prospects of family life, in this case on whether transnational parents intend to either continue to leave their children in their country of origin or whether they intend to bring them to their host country, the political stakes are higher for transnational parents as they could directly impact the future of their children.

The political involvement of transnational parents has received little to no attention, as most studies focus on social remittances and the continuation of care provision, under different guises, between the parents and their “left behind” children. However, transnational parents do not just stop being politically involved, even if at a minimal level, through voting, once they change countries. As argued above, their interest can be said to increase because they not only keep their position as voters intact, but they have a great stake in the outcome of elections, as these sway the direction in which their country of origin is going, thus impacting the future living conditions of their children.

The question this work addresses is where does the condition of uncertainty posed by Romanian transnational parenthood find its political expression? The main hypothesis is that transnational parents tend to find their political representation amongst anti-system populist parties. This is because the latter appeal to their sense of uncertainty by overpromising and oversimplifying key political messages in the form of opposition to existing political elites and established ways of “doing politics”.

This brings to the forefront the second contextual part of the argument: the rise in illiberalism. Though coined by Fareed Zakaria in 1997, the term illiberal democracy has gained more traction in the second decade of the 2000s, with Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban giving the term political weight in a speech he held in 2014. Illiberalism has certain definitive features that have taken over the European Union and the United States in the past ten years, with the most poignant events being Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016. (Shattuck, 2018). Major shifts triggered by the economic crisis in 2008 and the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015, have highlighted the fractures in traditional liberal democracies, giving rise to primarily anti-liberal, and sometimes even anti-democratic tendencies.

As defined by scholars, illiberalism “proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereignist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity. It proposes to restore national sovereignty in various spheres: internationally, by rejecting supranational and multilateral institutions in favour of sovereign nation-state; economically, by denouncing neoliberal orthodoxy and promoting protectionism at the nation-state level(while at the same time, when in power, sometimes implementing neoliberal reforms); and culturally by rejecting multiculturalism and minority rights in favour of majoritarianism.”(Laruelle, 2022) These features combined can all be found in most European Union countries, particularly in those where there has been a sharp rise of the political right and far-right parties, such as Italy, Germany or the Netherlands.

While democracies around the world are experiencing some sort of backsliding, with new technologies being used to spread misinformation and disinformation, as well as the compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have shaken not just the EU but the entire world to the core, Europeans are starting to not only lower their trust in their governments, but also to express discontent and become more polarized (Mascherini, 2024), all of which is a breeding ground for a further rise in illiberal tendencies.

To sum up, this book deals with times of increasing visibility of migrants and increasing illiberal stances. It poses that migrants experience uncertainty, that anti-system parties feed from uncertainty, and that in the ‘age of migration’ (De Haas et al, 2019) and illiberalism (Main, 2022; Shattuck, 2018), the process is even more relevant. Figure 1 graphically summarizes everything.

In the following part, as already announced, first I deal with the anti-system side of the argument, followed by the uncertainty story, and its connections with migration, later particularized at the level of transnational parenthood. After constructing this conceptual playground, I will explain which data I use for empirically documenting the mechanisms embedded into the theoretical argumentation. Then I use the data to test whether the argument sketched in this general contextualization finds evidence in the data.

Anti-system parties³

In this chapter I look at the nature of anti-system parties, with a focus on populist parties and explain how USR was an anti-system party at the time when this study was conducted. To do so, I will first provide a brief historical overview of the way in which USR came into being as a political party, followed by two theoretical depictions that illustrate the nature of USR as an anti-system party. Lastly, I will provide an overview of the reasons for which voters tend to prefer anti-system parties.

Anti-system parties: some defining traits

The first scholar to address the concept of anti-system party is Giovanni Sartori who gives both a narrow and a broad definition. According to the narrow definition, an anti-system party is one that is defined by „a belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates...that would not change – if it could-the government but the very system of government”(Sartori, 1976, pp. 132-133 in Zulianello, 2019, p. 17) As per the broad definition Sartori goes on to establish that „a party can be defined as being anti-system whenever it *undermines the legitimacy of the regime* it opposes”(Sartori, 1976, pp 132-133, original emphasis in Zulianello, 2019, p. 17) These definitions have come under some scrutiny and criticism

³ Some paragraphs from this chapter were published in the exact details of the paper titled Transnational parents, uncertainty and anti-system political preferences published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices issue 2/2025.

as they have tended to be interpreted as equating anti-system with anti-democratic. However, as Zulianello demonstrates upon revisiting the concept, this is not the case, especially when looking at anti-system parties not only from their ideological stance, but more importantly through their behaviour relative to the existing party system. (Zulianello, 2018; Zulianello 2019).

As one of the main theorists of anti-system parties, Zulianello brings two new elements to the debate. Firstly, he does not look at a party simply in terms of its ideological stance. The first element that he identifies is indeed the ideological orientation towards the status quo" (Zulianello, 2019), but instead of simply assessing whether this is expressed manifestly through an „anti-incumbent and policy-oriented opposition" he also looks at how an anti-system party brings into question „one or more established metapolicies". (Zulianello, 2019) Secondly, he looks at whether a political party is integrated or not in cooperative interaction at the systemic level. By combining these two elements, the ideological and the behavioral, Zulianello offers a more consolidated concept of anti-system party, one that can also be traced in time, by following the way in which a party adjusts its behavior. With regards to the second classification, Zulianello defines an anti-system party as a party that „has not taken part in very visible cooperative interactions at the systemic level, whether because of its own antagonistic self-perception and/or the attitudes of the other parties in the system; or despite a previous involvement in such interactions it deliberately favours a return to the margins of the party system through the process of radical disembedding." (Zulianello, 2019, p. 29)

One other perspective regarding anti-system parties is offered by Capoccia (2002) who stresses that „a party need not oppose all of the characteristics of the system in question to qualify as being anti-system: opposing only one of them is sufficient." (Capoccia, 2002, p. 20) He speaks of two types of „anti-systemness" namely relational and ideological, with the former focusing on the functioning of the party system, while the ideological one he equates with opposition to democracy, and more specifically to particular types of democracy. (Capoccia, 2002).

The appeal of anti-system parties

There is no shortage of literature that captures the rise of populism throughout the world, and particularly in Europe in the past ten years or more. (de la Torre, 2019, Zulianello, 2019, Zulianello 2018, Capoccia, 2002). If anything, scholars point out to a change in the party system, one that has started accommodating anti-system parties much more into the mainstream political space, even though they do not change their tactics once they join that space. (Zulianello, 2018; Zulianello 2019) Many anti-system parties are not profoundly anti-democratic, even when they challenge certain elements of democracy. Though on the one hand this proliferation could indicate that democracy is flourishing, making space for debate and expression of as diverse a set of opinions as possible, even those that contest it in some shape and form, it could also be argued that populist and anti-system parties chip away from the legitimacy of democratic regimes as they are parties who essentially “feel they can promise anything in the knowledge that they will never be called upon to make good on their pledges.” (Capoccia, 2002, p. 16).⁴

Current research into what makes populism and anti-system parties appealing looks at how populist rhetoric and populist attitudes are shaped. (Hawkins, 2019 in de la Torre, 2019) “Taking the substance of populism at face value, we can argue that populist attitudes become applicable when there is an environment of severe policy failure that can be blamed on elite misconduct.” (Hawkins, 2019 p. 64). One of the main areas of investigation is identifying how populist attitudes are shaped and whether they exist independently in the first place. What type of life conditions are conducive to appeals to populism and anti-systemic contestation? One of the most obvious answers is that populism appeals primarily to those who feel disempowered and even disenfranchised, but with a rising wave of

⁴ This paragraph was published in the paper titled Transnational parents, uncertainty and anti-system political preferences published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices issue 2/2025.

populism and anti-system parties, it is difficult to pinpoint which groups of people are most “liable” to respond to populist rhetoric, as contestation becomes a mainstream way of claims to power.⁵

Populism also needs a particular context for it to successfully appeal to voters, and one of its main characteristics is seeking “culpable agents” and personalizing policy failures. It is one thing to discuss and debate policy failures in their complexity, particularly in impersonal terms, and it is quite a different thing to always refer to a misbehaving elite that bears the main, if not the sole responsibility, for unfortunate policy outcomes. In terms of context, populism tends to capitalize on pre-existing fears and even threats to citizens’ core values, not just to physical existence. (Hawkins, 2019). This would explain why fearmongering is such a successful tactic employed by populists as well as why they need to create the idea of a distinct and unique people, in opposition to the existing political class. As Hawkins notes “the masses of citizens may want to believe they are the embodiment of democratic virtue and that their problems are caused by a conspiring elite” (Hawkins, 2019, p. 66) and this usually manifests itself into support for charismatic political leaders who can portray themselves as outsiders to the system and muster up a large number of followers. Once a strong antagonistic role has been set for the political outsider, it becomes more costly for them to collaborate with existing elites, which explains to a large extent why they seek to “circumvent” established institutions, not only just contest their role.

Anti-system parties in 2020 Romania.

Historical overview: how USR became a party

The roots of USR date back to 2008 when the Save Bucharest Association was founded by mathematician Nicușor Dan. The NGO had as its main focus the

⁵ This paragraph was published in the paper titled Transnational parents, uncertainty and anti-system political preferences published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices issue 2/2025.

conservation of the capital city's architecture as well as maintaining the city's green spaces, all the while promoting an anti-corruption platform, which was meant to hold accountable the then representatives of local authorities in Bucharest regarding the way in which the city was managed. Dan, the key figure behind the NGO, later went on to run for Mayor of Bucharest in the 2012 and 2016 local elections. The civic movement that emerged around Dan first led to the formation of a local political party – Union Save Bucharest, which was founded in 2015. Dan capitalized on his image as a civil society actor to run as an independent candidate, and given his notoriety in the NGO sector and a well-known figure whose main intention was to improve the city's urban planning, he „adopted an anti-system rhetoric [...] and used his outsider position to promote his own party as a different one.” (Gherghina and Grad, 2021) In the 2016 local elections, Dan registered significant success, coming second in the race for the City Hall and outranking several strong candidates who had established parties behind them.

In 2016, the Union Save Bucharest Party became the Union Save Romania Party, with Dan becoming the party's first leader. (Gherghina and Grad 2021). In 2016 the party also ran for Parliamentary elections and became the third largest party in Parliament, having managed to muster the support of primarily „disillusioned voters”. In 2017, USR voted for a new leadership, with Dan being replaced as Party President by Dan Barna, who set out to increase the party's membership and territorial coverage. (Gherghina and Grad 2021). By 2019, in the European elections, USR managed to form an alliance with PLUS, a niche party that was also formed in opposition to the existing established political parties at the time. This alliance secured the third highest score in the European elections, with USR consolidating its stance. (Dragoman, 2020). The same alliance came third in the 2020 Parliamentary elections, with an increased score from the previous 2016 elections and a strong profile as an opposition party. This is the period that is of interest for this research.

Founded at a time when the electorate was faced with its „two most salient cleavages in Romanian politics, namely anticommunism and anti-corruption” USR managed to „produce consistent anti-system and anti-elitist orientations.” (Dragoman, 2020) Its origins as a civic movement

indicated at the time an organic evolution into an outsider position of both the party leader and the party itself. It can be argued that it was primarily thanks to Dan's leadership that this transition occurred, as there is no proof that under different leadership the movement could have grown and consolidated into a party. Some scholars have pointed out that USR was in fact „formed around the personality and political appeal of its leader.” (Gherghina and Grad 2021). To this extent, Dan, who did not have much political experience has not only successfully built a movement but has also lent his personal credibility to the party as an anti-sytstem, outlier party that managed to establish itself on its own as it „did not benefit from the support of other parties' elites” (Gherghina and Grad, 2021) The evolution of the party from outlier to parliamentary actor and primary opposition party is consistent with its anti-system stance, one that started off in opposition to existing actors in power, namely the local authorities in Bucharest, and expanded into outright opposition of the existing political class. USR positioned itself as the party that was going to do politics differently and even denied membership to members of other political parties. (Gherghina and Grad 2021)

The party started off presenting itself „as an alternative movement” (Dragoman 2020), while avoiding a clear ideological orientation. Appealing to the public's discontent was a relatively easy way to claim ideological neutrality, but reinforced the party's populist inclinations in a bid to gather as wide a support base as possible. The party was built in response to and in reaction to the political environment at the time, especially on a strong wave of anti-elite sentiment, triggered by the 2015 *Colectiv* fire: On the night of 30 October 2015, in an overcrowded Bucharest club, a fire started and many customers, mostly youngsters that came to the *Colectiv* club for partying, ended up dying. The tragedy not only led to the death of tens of people. It also had a symbolic role to unmask the corruption and incompetence of local authorities in Bucharest in authorizing the use of public spaces that had no emergency measures in place in case of disaster. The tragedy was similar as public reaction to the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024. The Serbian tragedy also ended up with casualties (15

deaths and 2 severely injured). Antigovernmental protests immediately rose, and in March 2025 were still unfolding.

Coming back to the *Colectiv* incident, the protests brought hundreds of thousands into the streets and led to the collapse of the government. A caretaking technocrat government replaced it, as an expression of popular anger against mainstream parties and politicians, which overcame the composition of the parliament at the time.

USR cannot be said to be the direct result of that event, but it built on the strong opposition to the existing political class. It built a strong message that emphasized „the/our people” against a corrupt political elite. It also advocated for a minimalist state, with a reduction of the bureaucratic burden of the central government, thus criticizing the existing system of running the country. Moreover, USR continuously depicted the Parliament as a collection of corrupt individuals, lacking accountability and responsibility towards their electorate, contesting the very nature of the institution that represents one of the pillars of democracy: legislative power.

The methods employed by USR to gather momentum and increase its political foothold were through „new networks of social activism, by using internet campaigns, Facebook posts, and quick mobilization by means of text messaging, USR gained visibility on social media, partially transferring the dissatisfaction expressed by protest into favorable votes at the polls.” (Dragoman 2020) Its popularity was increasing amongst young, urban voters and built on increased dissatisfaction with the parties in power, who were seen as being not only inefficient and corrupt but also non-responsive to the needs of the people. Failure to effectively tackle corruption led to USR’s „practice of challenging many of the newly adopted laws, norms and other regulations in the Constitutional Court.” (Dragoman, 2020:6)

One of the main tenets of the party, that of fighting high-level corruption led to the party running a nation-wide campaign, following its entry into Parliament, to amend the Constitution so that corrupt officials would be banned from public office. USR managed to gather over 800,000 signatures in 2018 in support of its initiative, which was then sent for validation to the Constitutional Court. Following increased political pressure in 2019, the then

President Iohannis did organize a referendum, which had as one of its points of consultation the prohibition of “granting amnesties or pardons for corruption offenses.” (Dragoman, 2020) As referendums organized by the President are not legally binding, the result was only relevant in so far as it indicated the public’s support for such a measure, but it was the Parliament’s call whether to act on it, which did not happen.

Following its first time as a Parliamentary party, USR continued its opposition to the main parties in power: the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL). The main proof of its refusal to consider any kind of collaboration with the powers that be, was the fact that it decided to create an alliance with a small, niche party, PLUS that claimed its legitimacy based on its then leader’s, Dacian Cioloș former stint as Prime Minister heading a government of technocrats in 2015, and his strong pro-European stance, following his time as European Commissioner for Agriculture. It is in this format that USR-PLUS managed to gain third place in the European elections and run for Presidential elections in 2019, as well as local and parliamentary elections in 2020, when under the name of Alliance 2020 USR-PLUS, it came in third in Parliament and in local elections.

While it is relevant that the elections in 2020 took place under a set of extraordinary circumstances in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is not my intent to look specifically at USR’s behavior and positioning vis-à-vis the measures adopted by the Government in response to the pandemic. While USR’s stances during the pandemic could also have had an impact on its electoral success the second time around, namely after it managed to secure once again the third place in the parliamentary race, I look at the characteristics since it was officially founded as a party that stand out with regards to its anti-system and populist positioning. Authors have addressed the issue of “pandemic populism” (Doiciar and Crețan 2021), but this falls outside the scope of this research.

Perspective on USR as an anti-system party

By applying Zullianello's first definition, USR, was not only formed from the outset as an anti-system party, it also continued to act ideologically as an anti-system party. The first feature of USR is that „USR is to be defined as populist in terms of ideology, party origin, and organization” (Dragoman, 2020, p. 2). While a populist party is not necessarily an anti-system party, in the case of USR, its ideological stance confirms that the two concepts namely „populist” and „anti-system” apply.

USR started off as a civic movement, and a single-issue party, which focused primarily on saving the city of Bucharest from poor administration, corruption and inefficiency, yet it progressed towards populism, by expanding its area of interest toward issues such as opposing gold mining activities in Romania. In its early days, USR was appealing to civic activists and citizens without regard to their ideological stances, and rather favored a non-ideological position, from which it could contest the political actors in power. Zulianello categorizes such type of populism as ‚valence’ populism, meaning that the party engages in „nonpositional issues such as the fight against corruption, increased transparency, democratic reform and moral integrity, while emphasizing anti-establishment motives.” (Zulianello 2019, p. 332). This stance is very much in line with the view that a) „it is difficult to conceptualize a distinct populist ideology” (de la Torre, 2019, p. 8) and b) „Populists challenge conventional right and left distinctions.” (de la Torre, 2019, p. 13). Therefore, ideological ambiguity serves populist movements rather well, because it enables them to promise everything to everyone, while holding little to no accountability in terms of their ideological legitimacy. The one defining feature is that of contestation, opposition and of understanding politics as a constant source of antagonism between „the people” and most often „the corrupt elite”, both of which are unquestionably regarded as homogenous groups. Scholars have qualified USR's ideology as „a mix between demand for full transparency, anti-corruption, economic liberalism and Eurofederalism.” (Gherghina and Grad, 2021, p. 619). The two first elements belong to a clear populist agenda, in which features of the existing system are directly opposed in order to create the impression of an

outsider who best understands how to conduct politics, even though it does not actually have the experience to do so.

USR's position as of its founding in 2016 was clearly defined as an anti-establishment and anti-elitist party, with a strong anti-corruption discourse. Their point of departure is one of radical opposition to the political elites and the political system at the time. As described by de la Torre, USR's populism qualifies as „a sense of urgency: because the establishment is so corrupt, it needs to be overhauled immediately” (de la Torre, 2019, p. 2). Moreover, at the time, the leader of the party, Nicușor Dan portrayed himself as an outsider to politics and formed the party along the same lines in a bid to convey to the electorate that there was a different way of doing politics, one that was not to be found within the existing system of parties. As previously pointed out „the vagueness of the ideology is compensated for by the intensity of antagonism.” (Arato 2015: 160 in de la Torre, 2019, p. 39.)

Moreover, USR's witch-hunting strategy, that of going after corrupt political leaders also indirectly attacks the institutional set-up within which the mainstream parties operate. Through strong contestation of the existing set-up USR also qualifies as a populist party because it demands „swift action rather than negotiation and deliberation” (Moffitt 2016 a: 56 in de la Torre, 2019, p. 6). One other feature of their ideological populism is the claim to competence and performance. Though a newly formed party with no political expertise, these non-positional issues are also formulated in opposition to a political class seen as inefficient and non-responsive to the needs of the people. Following Zulianello's idea of contestation of metapolicies, that is of „crucial values and/or practices of the political, social, or economic system that are enshrined by the existing order, and are so salient that play a powerful role in structuring political competition.” (Zulianello, 2019, p. 31), USR was contesting the very institution of Parliament as it presented itself at the time. By portraying it primarily as a corrupt and obsolete institution, incapable of responding to the needs of the people, USR challenged the fundamental role of democratic institutions within the state and can even be said to have „raised the expectation that, with no parliament, direct democracy would be a suitable way to solve

numerous, and usually very intricate, political and social issues.” (Dragoman, 2020, p. 6)

The fact that the party changed its leadership a year after its formal birth does indicate a need to bring more internal cohesion and structure, in a bid to institutionalize and organize the party. Shortly after its founding in the summer of 2016, the party managed to stand its first national electoral test, coming in third in the Parliamentary elections in 2016. While electoral success is a measure of a party’s tendency towards integration within the existing system, it is its subsequent behavior that defines whether it continues to be oppositional to the system or not.

Let’s switch to Capoccia’s criteria for anti-system parties. USR fulfills the relational anti-systemness criteria by maintaining its distance from other parties and by adopting an isolated stance relative to other parties. While it does not belong to the ideologically political extremes, neither extreme left, nor extreme right, the party places itself outside the spectrum of a coalition building potential with the existing actors at the time. This is especially the case upon entering Parliament, when USR continued to oppose the main parties and to reject potential partners, while also being rejected by other parties, all the while continuing to send out „delegitimizing messages in its electoral propaganda and to isolate the party from the others.” (Capoccia, 2002, p. 24)

USR maintained its message of being radically different from the existing parties, even though it did not resort to violent or outright anti-system criticism, in the sense of an anti-democratic stance. What USR did do, even after becoming a Parliamentary party, was to continue to delegitimize the system it was part of and to continue to attract voters from the pro-system parties, a fact that was confirmed by the results of the European elections in 2019 „with the electoral score of the party moving from 8.9 percent to 22.4 percent.”(Dragoman, 2020, p. 4.)

Here we come to Zulianello’s second element, which is the behavior that a party employs, namely, whether it seeks to cooperate within existing streams of interaction. USR was a new-kid-on-the block party at the time when it entered Parliament. Though its electoral success was an expression of the dissatisfied voters, its rank as the third largest party in Parliament was

enough to place it in a position of collaboration with other existing parties. Shortly after coming to power the then coalition formed by the Social-Democrats and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe passed a series of controversial laws that were effectively reversing the progress made by Romania in the field of rule of law, since it joined the EU in 2007. The laws, which in effect were meant to decriminalize abuse in service and to offer pardon for certain acts of corruption, sparked one of the largest waves of protest in the capital city and the country. USR was firm in condemning the measures and its Members of Parliament also took to the streets. Following these protests, but also in its bid to oppose politics as usual, USR also took up the practice of „challenging many of the newly adopted laws, norms, and other regulations in the Constitutional Court” (Dragoman, 2020, p. 6.)

USR took the fight against corruption to new heights, by taking to the streets and seeking popular support to back up its initiative of banning corrupt officials from public office, in a bid to amend the Constitution so that anyone convicted of any crime and sentenced by a Court to imprisonment would be banned from running in any type of election. The fight against corruption became the party’s main appeal, but also its landmark trait. When one fights against the elites, the focus on creating collaborative interactions decreases, while contestation and delineation from existing actors and actions prevail. This radical rhetoric employed by USR is in line with the type of populist behaviors, which purport “to offer a corrective to failed or flawed forms of representation, in particular, those forms that are institutionalized in party organizations and the political elites who control them.” (de la Torre, 2019, p. 6) There is therefore little to no incentive for a party as USR to attempt collaboration with existing parties, as that would undermine its continuous election potential. If it can safely build on its discourse and strategy to build and maintain political power, populism becomes a successful strategy. (Barr, 2019). Moreover, USR sought no active alliances until 2019, when it formed an alliance with a small, niche, pro-European Party led by a former technocrat Prime Minister of Romania, who had also served as European Commissioner for Agriculture, and benefited from a positive image amongst the educated, urban electorate. It is in this set-up that USR ran for European elections in 2019 and later for Parliamentary elections in 2020.

It is worth noting that USR has consistently defined itself as an anti-system party, both before entering Parliament for the first time, as well as after becoming a Parliamentary party. It has repeatedly appealed to its anti-establishment stance, and did not align with its governing partners even when it became a governing party between December 2020 and August 2021. Thus, based on the evidence provided that USR is an anti-system party, as well as the way they have positioned themselves, it becomes self-evident that the party is indeed an anti-system party.

AUR: The other major anti-system party in 2020 Romania

In the above line of argumentation, the focus on USR is due to its main role as a driver of anti-mainstream sentiment. However, in 2020, USR was not the only major anti-system movement. AUR (the Alliance for Unity of Romanians) was making its first steps into the public view, and was gaining a lot of support, appearing out of the blue as a parliamentary party in the December 2020 elections. The party used the initials of a 1990s alliance of nationalists, embraced nationalistic views, declared pro-European, but anti-existing political class and found part of its roots in another social movement: the Coalition for the family, that unsuccessfully tried to ban in the 2018 referendum same-sex marriage by including into the constitution specific stipulations in this respect. With only a 21% turnout due to a boycott by mainstream parties, the Referendum produced no consequence despite its 95% in favor of the “traditional family”.

In the September 2020 local elections AUR had an apparently modest result, but it still won three small rural mayoralties and some 100 local councilors. Later on, in December 2020 it provided the big surprise of the elections, with 9% of the ballot, despite being under the radar in public opinion polls. AUR performed particularly well in diaspora, not only gaining 25% of the ballot, but also coming on top of all others in Cyprus and Italy, and second in France, Germany and Spain, all among the largest diasporic groups.

The timing of the elections is noteworthy as well in that “There is some evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has had particular influence over the rise of the AUR. The pandemic has intensified trends towards growing mistrust of the ‘mainstream’ political class, and growing trust in religious

leaders, not least because the Coalition government has conspicuously mismanaged public health during the outbreak.” The type of populism that AUR appealed to, however, was more focused on those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, such as the economically challenged workers abroad, specifically those in agriculture. (Doiciar, Cretan, 2021)

AUR also presented itself as the “party of the diaspora” seeking to bring unity among all Romanians, including by appealing to anti-minority sentiments, be they ethnic, such as the Hungarian population in Transylvania, or sexual minorities – AUR specifically references heteronormative traditions as the core of the Romanian nation. (Doiciar, Cretan, 2021)

Conclusion

In the 2020 elections, two anti-system parties emerged as winners in the Parliamentary elections. USR, which had already passed its first electoral test in 2016, and that continued to build its rhetoric and role in Parliament against anti-system lines, and AUR, the “surprise” winner, which rose to power partially as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but more deeply rooted in anti-system discourses that promoted nationalism, xenophobia, homophobia and a core focus on the diaspora at the time, in a plea to “unify all Romanians.”

Anti-system parties have been gaining more ground in Romanian politics based on an increase in rhetoric that contests the ruling elite and the idea of mainstream politics as corrupt and inefficient. Though appealing to different electoral pools, both USR and AUR have effectively promised to do politics differently and to represent the will of the people, though each from very different angles. Compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, promises and contestations of measures taken by the government can be said to be easily exploitable by charismatic leaders who are seen as saving “the nation” from the ills created by existing power structures and elites. Both parties promised to give a voice to the people, USR through its anti-corruption platform, while AUR appealed primarily to the economically disempowered and discontent.

Transnationalism⁶

In his seminal work on transnationalism, Vertovec (2009) makes an extensive effort to bring conceptual clarity to the term as well as to problematize the concepts of transnationalism and migrant transnationalism. In this book, the focus will be placed on his clarification of migrant transnationalism. For Vertovec migrant transnationalism is „a broad category referring to a range of practices and institutions linking migrants, people and organizations in their homelands or elsewhere in a diaspora” (Vertovec, 2009:13). Discussing the concept in a more recent light, given the fairly new term of transnationalism, Vertovec notes that transnational connections have existed since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries including in the case of families, who albeit split, maintained strong emotional ties and who also kept in touch with their families in their home countries through letters and remittances as well, the latter being „spent on both consumption and investment”(Vertovec, 2009:13). While these patterns of cross-national interaction are thus not new, what is new are the breadth, intensity and speed at which migrants can retain and nurture their bonds with the families they leave behind. This is rendered possible through the advances in technology and „inexpensive and frequent modes of travel, which have allowed for continuous and real-time communication within global migrant networks”. (Vertovec, 2009:14) For the specific purpose of looking at family

⁶ This section of the book was previously published in the paper titled Transnational parents, uncertainty and anti-system political preferences published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices issue 2/2025.

transnational ties Vertovec distinguishes between „great transnationalism“ which refers to the state and the economy and „little transnationalism“ the one that looks at family and households. He also mentions „linear“ transnationalism as a form of transnationalism that is „based on affective ties to others in a place of origin“. Therefore, in the case of transnational care one may speak of a narrow, linear type of transnationalism which shapes family life in the country of origin but also the cross-national type of relationship between carers and dependents.

Migration is listed as one of the most important elements of societal change in a postmodern world, leading to the transnationalization of family life among other things (Sandu, 2010; Voicu, 2019). The authors underline circulatory migration as one of the defining and more and more common types of migration in Eastern European societies, in which migrants leave their country of origin only to return and to then leave again either in the same country or in a different one. This can have an impact on the way in which transnational families are formed and maintained, a phenomenon in which one or both parents find themselves in a position to leave abroad in order to work and to thus help financially support the family left behind. In such cases, the children are thought to suffer from neglect and abandonment, which affects their participation in school and emotional development, however a number of studies conducted in Romania indicate that school performance is not affected to a great extent by the migration of one or both parents. This holds true for their emotional development as well. (Voicu, 2019).

Transnational Parenthood

Care and circulation: a perspective from Bonizzoni & Boccagni

In *Care (and) circulation revisited: a conceptual map of diversity in transnational parenting*, Bonizzoni and Boccagni look at family relations in an interaction-based way through the notions of care and circulation. “In principle, the notion of care circulation aptly stands for this mixture of distance and proximity – that is, for all day-to-day attempts to socially and emotionally bridge the former, and re-establish the latter.” (Bonizzoni and Boccagni, 2013:10) With regards to the geographical area of study, they note that “as far as Europe as a receiving context is concerned much more attention should be given to transnational family life in the “new” women-led flows from the Eastern part of the continent [...] Eastern European migration deserves better elaboration in a perspective of transnational care circulation”, which reinforces the need for more studies in this field.” (Bonizzoni and Boccagni, 2013:12).

Bonizzoni and Boccagni consider three factors, which determine the way in which care is circulated: i) the distribution of care as shaped by ethnicity, gender and generation; ii) pre migration family structures with their underlying division of social reproduction roles and responsibilities shaped by cultural and socio-demographic factors; and iii) care commitments and obligations with the subsequent social practices as defined by the subjects involved (i.e. transnational caregivers, local care-recipients, local foster

caregivers) based on cultural backgrounds and on the scope of care “circulation”. (Bonizzoni and Boccagni, 2013:2).

Departing from the fact that family relations and life are a topic subject to highly normative judgements, Bonizzoni and Boccagni look at a series of ideas around the gendered aspect of family care in the absence of the mother. Based on studies from several Asian countries they conclude that rarely does the transfer of care occur directly to the father, while the migration of the mother involves as well an expansion of motherhood into the realm of breadwinning, thus challenging traditional norms. It is often the case that other women step up or are tasked with providing more direct care, as grandmothers and aunts, thus reshaping the way in which immediate families work. It is commonplace to fear that no form of care provided by substitute carers can properly replace the needs of children when it comes to affection, nutrition, medical care, schooling, disciplining and control. (Bonizzoni and Boccagni, 2013:5) The quality of care provided is dependent partly on the caregivers’ socio-demographic profile as well as on the relationship shared with the children’s emigrant parents and the composition of the household where the children are being cared for before and after parental migration. (Bonizzoni and Boccagni, 2013:6). Caregivers are responsible for managing and circulating care resources, from handling remittances and gifts to enabling the communication between children and parents and their role can result from a myriad of circumstances- in some cases they are the obvious choice, in others they result from family negotiations or they are the only choice, based on a lack of alternatives. The carer’s relationship with the parent can also define the nature of transnational caregiving as it impacts the “care triangle” parent-carer-cared for child. If children are to move into new households, they also enter new sets of relationships with different family members not just with the caregivers alone. Conversely, caregivers may enter established households themselves, so that care is circulated in different forms depending on the setting in which it is placed.

Lastly, the authors briefly give an overview of the six factors pertaining to care and the intersectionality between them. These are:

- 1) Kind of care resources – whether material resources, time, affection or information
- 2) The channels of care – the actual means through which care is exerted, whether through ICT communication, phone calls, mail, money transactions and such like
- 3) The identities and socio-demographic attributes of the subjects participating in the care circulation process – the determinants of gender and age/generation, the roles and relationships that family members take on
- 4) The temporal dimension of transnational care practices – namely the frequency, the timing of care practices, as well as wider factors such as life courses, whether individual or family
- 5) The geographical dimension – whether immigration policies and regimes impact the categorization of migrants and so indirectly the type of care they may be able to provide from afar; as well as the way in which distance influences the care that migrant parents provide
- 6) The reasons and motivations behind the transnational care provision – including the social and cultural elements that contribute to migration and those that help shape caring arrangements, as well as the final goal of family reunification or homecoming, as the case may be.

The interplay between factors is often shaped by life-course events related to family: “While transnational family life often leads to family reunification or return migration, it may even reproduce itself across time, but under changed circumstances.” (Bonnizoni and Boccagni, 2013:8) In such scenarios “both structural factors and grassroots family strategies, possibly resulting from extended intra-family negotiations” are relevant to look into. (Bonnizoni and Boccagni:9, 2013). What happens in certain cases is that the parents wish to continue raising their children in their country of origin and contributing to their social mobility through their remittances, all the while keeping their children in social and cultural milieus that are more in line with the “parents’ values and lifestyles” (Whitehouse, 2009)

Family is a conglomerate of discursive and non-discursive, performative practices, therefore the way in which a family presents itself is equally important as the way it is actually constituted. As presented by Ducu, families can be conceived as achieved goals, dynamic concepts, which are more or less dependent on time and space. There is an inherent geographic dimension to the concept of family, one which determines how family is shaped and which refers to the formations, spatial-temporal fluxes within which families manifest themselves. (Ducu, 2011:32). Moreover, family takes on an idealized image about the roles within it that need to be fulfilled, and how the behaviours pertaining to these roles needs to be displayed. There are expectations about how the roles need to be played as well as about how the roles need to be displayed within the family. (Ducu, 2011:33)

Against these background practices, pertaining to transnational families, the family life led by many migrants who live far away from some family members and whose experience crosses national boundaries, need to be more exposed and displayed, though they will come at odds with the more conventional notions about family life, which ultimately is culturally defined.

One thing conventional and transnational families share, for example, is reciprocity. Many studies are said to demonstrate that the support that migrants offer to their family members left back home, is on par with the role that the said family members take on in ensuring the functioning of the family. Thus, for example, the caring for the children left behind is done by members of a different generation, along the life course and with differentiated approaches for the respective cared-for person in order to respond adequately to their needs. Moreover, there is a close interaction between the capacity for caring and the obligation, or rather duty to provide caring, based on the assumed responsibilities negotiated within the family and shared by family members. (Ducu, 2011:38)

The capacity to care is influenced by macro, meso and micro factors; macro such as: migration and labour policies, access to communication technology and transport, international policies shared by the sending and the receiving country. Meso factors include community support, supporting local

associations, and social services for a local infrastructure of care and lastly, micro or personal factors include the resources available to the persons involved in care provision, namely: financial, professional status, language, health and time). (Ducu, 2011: 39)

The obligation to care is the one most influenced by cultural expectations of transnational care relations, meaning that notions about what is the appropriate type of role and responsibility fulfilled by family members in providing care influence the way migrants perceive their duty/obligation. Thus, obligation or duty help determine what it means to be a “good mother” or a good daughter, a moral sense that touches on both gender roles and generational aspects, i.e. whether someone is the first-born within a family and therefore is expected to carry more responsibility in their care towards the elderly, for example. (Ducu, 2011:40).

Thus, both the capacity and the obligation/duty to provide care mutually influence each other, but are mediated by a complex set of factors, such as the roles and responsibilities negotiated and assumed within the family. These, in turn, will also influence the type of and motivation for migration, which will equally impact the type of relationships and expectations that ensue within the family. The way in which a migrant decides to migrate and settle in a given country has an impact within the family and creates the space for the negotiation of different roles. The decision of a family member to migrate triggers a reaction from different family members, whether parents or siblings, and it can profoundly impact the feelings between family members and consequently the expectation to offer and receive care. (Ducu, 2011: 42).

“Thus the processes of care are negotiated at the intersection of individual choices within the micro patterns of kinship and the sense of obligation within the structure and infrastructure of more formal set-ups, such as services, technology and resources pertaining to the macro and meso factors aforementioned.” (Ducu, 2011: 45)

From factors to themes

The six factors depicted by Bonizzoni & Boccagni (2013) provide a structure in which transnational parenthood occurs. They involve opportunities and constraints that entangle with parenthood practices and attitudes reflected in several themes that need to be considered. In *Central Themes in the Study of Transnational Parenthood* (Carling et al, 2012), the authors present the different themes that influence transnational parenthood as dealt with by the literature in the field. Noting that „Care arrangements are often the most tangible challenge for transnational parents, and an area where material and emotional concerns intersect” (Carling et al., 2012:191), the three authors identify six themes which shape transnational motherhood and fatherhood. These are: gender, care arrangements, legislation, class, communication, and moralities.

It is widely acknowledged that „the essence of migrant transnationalism is that physical absence is compatible with social presence and participation” (Carling et al, 2012: 192) and that parents’ participation is both shaped and constrained by the six aforementioned themes, which shape their migration experience and their capacity to care for their children. Migration of parents is a topic that carries with it many of the societal expectations around the traditional roles that caretakers must fulfill, particularly when it comes to children. The difficulty in pinning down migration decisions and patterns as determined by parents’ leaving their children behind is manifold.

Specific themes/mechanisms of transnational parenthood

Gender

When it comes to **gender**, it is widely acknowledged that the expectations for mothers to be primary carers, who look after their children is the main societal expectation, but also a social reality in which children themselves react differently to their migrant mothers being away, rather than their fathers. (Dreby, 2006, Parennas, 2010, Fan&Parennas 2018). Children tend to be more attached to their mothers, miss them more and be more accusatory

of them when they need to depart. Equally, the type of migration regime that is currently in place demands that women migrate more and more, in order to fill up labour roles of care and domestic workers in Western countries. Seeing as gender roles of enacting transnational parenthood are different, there is a noticeable tendency among women to try and overcompensate their absence in many instances, more so than in the case of fathers. "Feelings of shame, guilt, longing and loneliness are common among mothers who are living apart from their children. These feelings are shaped in large part by the social construction of motherhood and gender expectations." (Carling, et al, 2012: 209)

Mothers leave with the hope of bettering the lives of the children they leave behind in the long term, but they need to secure a presence in their lives while they are away as well. Equally, because of the expectation that women conduct the reproductive work of caring for children, it is usually other women who are expected to step up and fill the role of the mother while she is away. However, fathers are not left unaffected by the process of separation, it is rather that their emotions are not usually studied, but what is known is that their coping strategies are more self-destructive than those of mothers. (Carling et al, 2012 : 195). Gender relationships are both rebuilt and re-enacted through the migration of women, sometimes they become the main breadwinners, while fathers take on a leading caring role, or alternatively, they become the main carer, when the mother is away. Irrespectively, "Migrant mothers and fathers must relate to societal norms and attitudes justifying their actions and performing their parenting roles." (Carling et al, 2012: 193)

Care arrangements

One other important aspect of transnational arrangements or family life is related to **care arrangements**, which involves leaving certain carers in place for the children back home and the relations built between migrant parents and the latter. The relations between parents and carers become fundamental to the well-being of the children, and such relations are shaped by

remittances, for example. Sometimes relationships are negatively impacted by the way carers use or misuse remittances and by who is actually involved in providing care to the children. Care arrangements typically involve women in the immediate or extended family and, depending on how well the children are taken care of, it is mothers who become the absent object of resentment, more so than fathers. Family tensions may further develop through challenges that arise from migration-induced separation and what is relevant for recent waves of migration, such as the migration of parents from Romania, is that tensions are likely to occur upon reunification and bonds between parents and children are markedly reorganized in the case of the migration of mothers, more so than the migration of fathers. Depending on the length of time that members of families remain separated for, families at both ends, both those who migrated, and those left behind, become reorganized as “children grow up and mature, and the lives of migrating parent(s) are transformed by a new environment, new relations and different outlooks on parenthood and life. A consequence of long-term separation is the formation of new families, with combinations of step-parents and step-siblings who barely resemble the families whom other family members imagine (Bernhard et al.2005; Menjivar 2006).

When it comes to actual practices of care, it is not necessarily the case that proximity is the main factor behind how networks of care work. Care circulation takes place in both distance and proximity settings as “geographical proximity or distance do not correlate straightforwardly with how emotionally close relatives feel to one another, nor indeed how far relatives will provide support or care for each other” (Bonnizoni and Boccagni, 2013:10). In effect as the two authors note “the essence of migrant transnationalism lies in the functional substitution of physical absence with social presence” and “transnational caregiving inherently builds on forms of care circulation between people being physically displaced from one another, with significant parental and/or affective ties, whose “desire” or need “for closeness” has been jeopardized by migration.” (Bonnizoni and Boccagni, 2013:11)

Migration policies

An additional element that shapes the way in which transnational relations are carried out, or rather how and if reunification can take place between families, is related to the **immigration policies** of receiving countries as they can dictate, for example, how long the reunification process might take. However, this provision does not apply to Romanian migration to the UK yet, although Brexit will have an impact on it (for those Romanians who fail to register in the UK). For the purpose of this study, legislation is not an important variable as migration within the EU, and still within the UK, is not regulated in a way that impedes the reunification of Romanian families. Emigration and diaspora policy in the country of origin, add to the legislative context that may ease the transnational familial arrangements.

Class

One other element that influences the migration experience is the **class status** of families prior to migration. (Carling et al, 2012) with poorer families choosing migration to help lift their children out of poverty or as a survival strategy merely (Schmalzbauer, 2004). For parents from poor and marginalized backgrounds who migrate, their transnational mobility becomes very limited, whereas middle-class or more privileged families have a wider variety of choices, such as professional or lifestyle choices at their disposal (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). A study conducted with Indonesian women migrants (Silvey, 2006) confirmed that class mobility was a central decision behind women's decision to migrate and that women considered that breaking gender norms was better to contribute to improving the material condition of their children, rather than conforming and living together with their children in poor economic circumstances.

Communication channels

Yet another element that fundamentally shapes transnational parenting is **long-distance communication**, which is the way in which migrant parents in particular “strive to be socially and emotionally present while physically absent.” (Carling et al, 2012: 203) In the context of transnationality, communication helps in two ways: it contributes to exchanging information and it provides the platform for emotional engagement, and it helps to reconfirm the relationship as parents become involved in the daily life of their children (Carling et al, 2012). In terms of communication, two elements that are important in structuring the parent/child relationship are the *frequency* and *regularity* of communication, but these are, in turn, influenced by certain asymmetries. Migrants are the ones who are able to initiate communication, holding the financial and technological means to do so and usually being in the position to afford the costs of communication more so than in the case of non-migrant families. An asymmetry is thus created between the parents and the children, as it is presumed that the parents are in a better position to initiate and sustain communication, rather than the other way around. However, given the ease of communication within the EU, it is once again possible to presume that children of migrants are also able to contact and communicate with their parents, a possibility based on previous studies showing, for example, that mobile phone ownership among children of migrants was higher than that of children without migrant parents. (Carling et al., 2012:205). What communication does, even virtual communication, is to maintain and recreate a certain type of relational closeness, one that upholds “socio-emotional ties” (Carling et al., 2012).

Moralities also come into play when discussing transnational family relations. The most common involve expectations from non-migrants for migrants to give and send remittances, while non-migrants are seen as entitled to receiving, an asymmetry which creates a specific set of pressures on migrant parents, both in their relationship with children, as well as in their relationship with other adults in the community of origin.

Norms and values

Carling, Menji'var and Schmalzbauer (2012) also speak about **conjugal moralities** and the **morality-laden area of parenting**, which carries with it many norms and expectations. In the case of the former, this occurs when only one parent is away, leaving the parent who stays behind to be "supervised", particularly in the case of mothers who stay behind with their children, by other family members or members of the wider traditional community. When it comes to parenting, the trade-off for migrant parents comes down to a clear dichotomy between the possibility to provide material wellbeing, and being physically present and emotionally available. However, moral interpretations of behaviour occur particularly when migrants "outsource" their care responsibilities to other members in their families or other community members, though the latter scenario is less relevant for the purpose of this study. The moral compensation offered for these instances takes the form of remittances, but there is also an element of "care, belonging and kinship", which is blended in.

Cross-layer factors: Age of children

Aside from the six themes identified by Carling et al (2012), one may also point out another essential factor that shape transnational family life. When children are involved, the **age of the children** becomes essential. (Artico, 2013). Children's psychological development stage and their social environment shape the relationship children keep with their absent parents as well as the ties they form with their carers. It has been shown that adolescent children left behind can experience the separation more intensely than younger children and may have needs for emotional connection and communication needs with their parents, which are sometimes more present than in the case of younger children. "the children left behind of different ages and developmental stages establish different forms of what Baldassar et al. (2007) term "staying in touch", develop varied relations of care and attachment, communicate differently and demand different levels of emotional support and intimacy from their absent parents." (Carling et. al,

2012). Moreover, migrant parents can perceive in a slightly distorted way the developmental stage at which their children find themselves in, as they may still imagine their children left behind as still small and dependent, and gender and age differences occur as well throughout the child's developmental stage, which is not something that the parents may pick up on very quickly, especially when daily interaction is not possible.

Children's age affects their agency and ability to both understand and shape their own behaviour in relation to both their own role and that of the primary carer, in transnational care relationships. The younger the child, the higher the probability that there is a hindrance to the way in which the parent is able to build significant intimate connections with them. Conversely, as children grow and enter the stage of adolescence, migration is more likely to destabilize existing parent-child relationships and to widen the potential for tension and conflict. In this case, long-distance relations carry multiple meanings and expectations, which help maintain a certain level of desirable closeness, but which equally destabilize the family members involved, as abandonment allegations may occur. Parental absence hinders the creation of intimacy and the exertion of control on children, yet the frequency of transnational practices, particularly in the shape of remittances, home visits and phone calls, becomes paramount to how sustainable and efficient caring from afar can be. (Bonnizoni and Boccagni, 2013:7)

Conclusion⁷

Transnational parenthood is primarily enacted through ways, which establish how the care transfer between the parent and the children left behind takes place. There is a variety of ways in which care can be manifested, ways that go beyond the sending of remittances, but that actually actively involve the parents in their children's lives albeit from afar. There are specific patterns of care and ways of interaction which establish

⁷ This section of the book was previously published in the paper titled Transnational parents, uncertainty and anti-system political preferences published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices issue 2/2025.

the relationship and consolidate it, despite the difficulties that arise from the lack of physical presence.

One important factor is that transnational parents continue to live their lives, despite, or rather in a certain continuation of their role as parents, but also as migrants in the society where they live. In the analysis part of this work, I will demonstrate how different elements of a transnational parent's life come into play and help shape their political preferences.

On uncertainty

Uncertainty in today's society

The idea that we live in a “risk society” was first put forward by Ulrich Beck in his seminal work that posits that modernity has been taken over by both natural and manufactured risks, leading to a breakdown of traditional forms of living, leading to individuals living in an almost permanent state of vigilance – a way of life that is “anxiety provoking”. Some scholars have even qualified Beck’s line of thinking as a usage of “uncertainty to promote overwhelming pessimism” (Ericson, 2005, p. 661). Other authors have noted that “risk and uncertainty are often used interchangeably.” (Karl, 2018, p. 131), while others have argued that “uncertainty refers to a lack of confidence about our knowledge.” (Brown, Damery, 2009, p. 81). In this work, I take uncertainty to be a more encompassing state with which individuals and society are faced, while risks are the more measurable and quantifiable parts of uncertainty. That is to say that while risk alone does not define the state of uncertainty, it does contribute to determining it, as individuals tend to assess their level of uncertainty also by taking into account the risks that they are faced with.

By design, uncertainty and risk are what seem to characterize late modernity. (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994). More precisely, during traditional and modern times, people reduced the risks and uncertainty through what Foucault called normalization. Meanwhile, in ‘late modernity’ (Giddens, 1994), embracing diversity and the individual right to ‘self-expressing’ and ‘self-enhancing’ (Inglehart, 1997), leads to another salient paradigm: people are

different, and therefore it is difficult to put them under the same type of predictability model. This leads to axiological uncertainty (Voicu, 2005), a state in which risk derives from the unknown of the lifestyles of those around you, as opposed to traditional societies where everybody acted virtually in the same way, had a similar goal in life, and followed a similar birth-school-marriage-work-parenting life.

In late modernity, the typology of risk varies from natural hazards to interpersonal risks that involve more directly intimate relationships, and marriage and parenting (Lupton, 2013), all taking place in a process of “reflexivity” (Beck, 1992), characteristic of modernity, where self-awareness takes center stage in how individuals respond to risk and, consequently how they handle uncertainty. While uncertainty and risk are not one and the same concept, uncertainty is based on risk, and it cannot be looked at separately from the notion of risk. Some of the scholarly work around risk is also preoccupied with uncertainty, maintaining that the former is a determining factor of the latter – „uncertainty occurs due to an inability to predict risk, often due to insufficient information.” (Yang, O’Conner and Wibowo, 2023, p. 1).

Uncertainty is considered to be endemic to modern-day society in that “With the breakdown of many of the traditional certainties structured through age, gender and social class, a plurality of new risks are generated, including unemployment and under-employment, marital instability and family breakdown, accompanied by high levels of anxiety and insecurity. Life becomes less certain even while it is placed more under one’s control.” (Lupton, 2013, p. 92)

Expert bodies such as the UN report that “Layers of uncertainty are stacking up and interacting to unsettle our lives in unprecedented ways” (UN, 2022, p. iii). Migration, economic stagnation or decline, as well as the rise of illiberal regimes, seem to paint a picture in which uncertainty at the individual level tends to increase. „All of these changes are seen as contributing to a particular way of understanding the self and the world that differs dramatically from earlier eras. For the individual, it is argued, these changes are associated with an intensifying sense of uncertainty, complexity,

ambivalence and disorder, a growing distrust of social institutions and traditional authorities and an increasing awareness of the threats inherent in everyday life.” (Lupton, 2013, p. 8)

This work does not look at uncertainty and risk as defined by mathematical models explaining probabilities for the occurrence of certain events, neither does it abide by theories of “governmentality” (Lupton, 2013) which broadly refers to “political discourses that are intended to evoke specific practices in relation to risk and uncertainty” (Ericson, 2005, p. 661), but rather as a lived experience with “understandings of and responses to uncertainty [...] inevitably wrapped up in people’s intimate realities, historical memories, personal experiences and social identities. (Scoones, 2019, p. 14). Uncertainty can also be seen at an individual level as the result of “a process that leads to little predictability of medium to long term trajectories” (Voicu, 2005, p. 118)

Uncertainty is experienced differently at the individual level than at the collective level. While collectively we live in a system that has taken some measures against risks, be they as varied as environmental or terrorism-related risks (Ericson, 2005), which refer to “a set of discourses and techniques that make demands on entities to exercise their foresight in enterprising ways and thereby achieve freedom.”(Ericson, 2005, p. 660), at the individual level the experience is “associated with an intensifying sense of uncertainty, complexity, ambivalence and disorder, a growing distrust of social institutions and traditional authorities and an increasing awareness of the threats inherent to everyday life.” (Lupton, 2013, p. 18)

Uncertainty can be felt in several degrees as it is a subjective state. (Zamfir, 1990). I will continue to illustrate how migration increases uncertainty and how transnational parenthood brings an even more heightened state of uncertainty to individuals.

Uncertainty and migration

Migration is one of the life events that is arguably most fraught with uncertainty, in so far as it “exhibits a considerable “uncertainty about uncertainty”.(Bijak and Czaika, 2020, p. 24) This can be said to apply to

different types of migration, whether forced or entered into willingly, as uprootedness itself is a sufficiently definite act that leads to uncertainty, irrespective of whether one speaks of asylum seekers or economic migrants. Leaving behind known societal models and family structures, to embark on a new life trajectory leads to uncertain processes and outcomes of an individual's life. As argued by Voicu "the abrupt change in social norms, in the known order of things, leads to a lack of predictability of the social environment and leads to individual and collective difficulties in adjusting to a new order." (Voicu, 2005, p. 68).

In a seminal study on risk and migration Williams and Balaz bring two main aspects related to uncertainty in migration to the fore. One is that uncertainty is "imperfect knowledge about current conditions both in the place of origin and possible destinations" (Williams, Balaz, 2011, p.4) Thus, a migrant, or rather a potential migrant, is faced with uncertainty from the outset, seeing as there is little, or rather unexperienced knowledge, of the place where they want to migrate. As diligently as one may prepare for the experience of migration, the lived experience will always be fraught with uncertainty and important questions around integration and settling potential in one's chosen destination. One important factor, for example, relates to the individual's knowledge of the language of the country they wish to leave to, as language is a major barrier in facilitating economic and social integration. Depending on the migrant's pre-departure economic status, it may be that they need to adapt "sur place" and start studying the language of the place of destination once already there, which in itself poses many challenges.

The second element mentioned by Williams and Balaz is that "the second source of uncertainty is the unpredictability of the future." (Williams, Balaz, 2011, p.5) While it is true that the future is generally speaking unpredictable, in the case of migrants this is much more pertinent as "migrants face specific challenges in forming future expectations, ranging from questions about exchange rates movements, to the unpredictability of migration politics, to how children's identities change when growing up in another country." (Williams, Balaz, 2011, p. 5). Here one other element of uncertainty can be noticed, namely the willingness to become "the Other" and to not be able to anticipate how host countries and communities will react to one. The

uncertainty of uprootedness thus takes on a double meaning, one which relates to how one will be received in a given community, and how one's identity will be shaped by one's absence in their home community.

One can argue that every aspect of a migrant's life is fraught with uncertainty, at least at the outset. Things such as job perspectives, housing, social integration are all challenges to which the act of migration offers no guarantees. One such element is, for example, housing, with most migrants living in temporary housing or rentals, it is never certain for how long or indeed if their housing situation can be considered to be stable over an extended period. Another element is that of social integration, as mentioned above, a migrant is willingly placing himself in the "Other" category upon migration, which makes them susceptible to different scenarios depending on the country of destination. In countries where migration is intensely politicized and where open anti-migration discourses are allowed or even endorsed, the probability of social integration is lower.

Migrants also face uncertainties with regards to whether or not the country of destination is their final destination. Oftentimes, migrants engage in multiple migrations, and also in "pendular migration" between their country of origin and their country of destination. A higher degree of mobility is expected to be associated with a higher degree of uncertainty about future trajectories and stability.

For a migrant, the new identities they need to acquire, professional, social and even political, come with a set of uncertainties as well, about whether or not these layers will lead to a successful integration in the country of destination and whether the changes they undergo are sufficiently socially approved for them to lead a fulfilling life. Each story of migration comes with its own challenges of adjusting to a new cultural space with new rules and different sets of expectations from the migrant themselves, which in turn shape their behavior. The migrant can be said to live in a long state of uncertainty as to the appropriateness of their role within the society of destination, before they can become familiarized with the social, cultural and other demands that living in a new place makes on them.

Uncertainty and transnational parenthood⁸

The breakdown of traditional family models is a much more salient phenomenon in nowadays' society, not only because of changing gender roles (Beck, 1992), but also because of population movement and migration. One sub-type of migrants amongst economic migrants is that of parents who leave their home country and leave their family behind. Modern migration has led to the "transnationalization" of family life, and this has led to further uncertainty for not only migrants themselves but for their home families as well.

This is where the challenge of transnational parenthood gains further meaning. A migrant on their own has to face a certain degree of uncertainty for and by themselves, but this becomes compounded when that migrant is also a transnational parent. Here several questions arise one of which relates to whether the migrant is willing to increase the level of their own uncertainty through their identity as a parent, and thus put themselves in a situation where one of the identities takes precedence over the others. That is accept increased uncertainty as a transnational parent, while decreasing their uncertainty as a migrant, with view to ensuring an overall "better life" for the child/children they left behind.

Every individual fulfills multiple roles, whether they are migrants, workers, parents, or members of the community they live in. The uncertainty they feel,

⁸ This section of the book was published in the paper titled Transnational parents, uncertainty and anti-system political preferences published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices issue 2/2025.

depending on the role they fulfil, varies. The condition of transnational parent holds the highest uncertainty in terms of the role that the parent will play in their child's life. Whether they are perceived as a provider and a long-distance presence, mediated nowadays by technology, the transnational parent can never know how the relationship with their child will evolve and what it will turn to. Building and maintaining a mostly "elusive" presence in their child's life, puts the parent in a permanent condition of uncertainty relative to the role they play. The process of renegotiating presence and, in some cases authority, or the fact that the parent may want to bring the child to their country of destination, become constant sources of uncertainty, without offering any clear answers to the individual as to what the best course of action may be.

There are also differences in how uncertainty is expected to be shaped for the transnational parents. Irrespective of the level of engagement between the parent and their child, the uncertainty about the future relationship prevails. A parent who is not present cannot always claim to have a direct influence on the life of his child, and a lot depends on whether the parent intends to bring the child and their other parent in the country of destination.

While this work looks primarily at the parent and their state of uncertainty, it is worth noting that there are clear implications for children as well. "In such cases, the children are thought to suffer from neglect and abandonment, which affects their participation in school and emotional development, however, a number of studies conducted in Romania indicate that school performance is not affected to a great extent by the migration of one or both parents. This holds true for their emotional development as well (Voicu, 2019)." (Voicu, Dima, 2024, p. 17) We can however expect there to be some level of emotional distress and uncertainty concerning the children as well, with grandparents usually taking on the role of parenting, which can lead to generational imbalances in terms of what type of rules and models the children are exposed to.

Nowadays, migrants are agents who live in at least a partly risk-laden society, with changing values and increasing diversity that leads to uncertainty. Their condition also adds to the risks associated with migration.

For transnational parents, uncertainties related to the separation of their family across borders, add to the complexity of their situation and make it even more difficult to control and to predict.

Transnational parenthood, uncertainty and anti-system party preference

Thus far I have presented the concepts that the book will apply of transnational parenthood, uncertainty and anti-system party preference. As already mentioned, the three parts of literature act as a puzzle in which I seek to establish the connection between transnational parenthood and anti-system party preference, via the state of uncertainty that transnational parents find themselves in. It is possible to argue that different degrees of uncertainty trigger different intensities of the anti-system preference.

The roles that transnational parents take on, bring a degree of complexity to their status as migrants in a country of destination. The several layers, presented through the themes that parents must address in their long-distance parenting practices have direct implications on both their own lives and how they structure them, as well as on the lives of the children left behind. When taking their challenges in establishing a secure, solid and long-distance role, outside the classical one of sending remittances back to their family in the country of origin, the way in which transnational parents lead their lives becomes a constant effort to adjust their life as it happens abroad, with their role and life as it plays out in the family of origin, specifically regarding their children.

The literature in the field of transnational families and parenthood looks primarily at the way in which care is transferred between the parent and the child, with a stronger focus at times on the gender dimension, where the roles of fathers and mothers are differentiated both in terms of expectations, but also in the way they play out. However, in this work, I seek to look at transnational parents also as political actors whose preferences and behaviour are shaped by their role. Transnational parenthood is not just

about fulfilling a clearly established role in the family, but it has wider repercussions on the life of the parent.

In the analysis part of this work, the three elements will play out in a way that clarifies that the state of uncertainty of transnational parents does have an impact on their political preferences as well.

Methodology⁹

In this study I look at the situation of Romanian transnational parents living in the UK and Germany at the time that the interviews were conducted. Romania registers one of the highest rates of migration in the EU. This phenomenon requires a more in-depth approach, one that also looks at the experience of parents who migrate to different countries to work and who leave their children behind. The case-study is carried out with respect to a specific type of experience, that of transnational parenthood and its political implications.

According to Tonon (2015) the main purpose of qualitative methods is “to understand meaning for participants in the study of the events, situations and actions in which they are involved”. Qualitative studies afford a more in-depth understanding and coverage of a given phenomenon and are suitable for capturing specific contexts in which certain events occur and develop. As it has been pointed out, case studies are preferred “when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 2003:1). In this case I have no control over the events, to which further criticism can be brought as to the potential bias provided by the uniqueness of the case.

A qualitative study is best placed to provide the insight needed to analyze people’s experience of transnational parenthood. The best way to do this is

⁹ This chapter is part of an article that was published in the paper titled Transnational parents, uncertainty and anti-system political preferences published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices issue 2/2025.

to interview people, as interviews give them a chance to make themselves heard and to provide their own perspective about their life experience, perceptions and feelings. Interviews “lend themselves most naturally to the study of individual lived experience. In fact, when one wants to know how an individual experiences some phenomenon, interviewing has a certain primacy among the different methods” (Brinkmann, 2013:47). Therefore, in order to unveil the experience of transnational parenting, a qualitative study that uses interviews is among the best suited approaches.

The disadvantages of using qualitative studies are that they are arguably not sufficiently generalizable in terms of frequency distributions and that they fall short of producing results that are valid across longer periods of time or that stand the test of transferability across cultures or different settings. (Gheondea, 2014). There is also a risk in sample selection, which is however overcome by using a procedure close to respondent-driven sampling. Equally, there is criticism related to the subjectivity of the case study, affording the researcher’s own interpretations to prevail and therefore, “the validity of case studies would be wanting”. (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 219)

The selection of the interviewees was made based on accessing online Facebook groups of Romanians abroad in Germany and the UK. I thus posted across a high number of groups a message requesting the participation of parents who had left their children in Romania and who were willing to offer an interview online. This ensured the agreement of participants in the study, on a voluntary basis, and could also help create a diverse pool of selection. The technique is close to the Respondent-Driven Sampling (Heckathorn, 2011), but applied to qualitative research. It takes into account the degree of homophily of certain groups, which would facilitate identifying the right respondents, with the characteristics sought after, i.e. parents working abroad whose children are left behind in Romania.

The interviews were all held online due to resource constraints but also given the time period during which they were held 2021-2022, when some Covid-restrictions were still in place. I also reverted to word-of-mouth recommendations, where some interviewees have been recommended to me by acquaintances and friends. Though I have not tracked the refusals, there

were quite a few instances during which the legitimacy of my request was questioned and thought of as phishing for personal information for nefarious purposes. Based on this selection of cases, I was able to gather 10 respondents, 5 men and 5 women, living in Germany and the UK, who agreed to participate in the in-depth interview. The interview guide was structured so that I could capture the lived experience of transnational parenthood, to give parents the possibility to describe their stories and experiences of migration and the role that parenthood plays in that experience.

The number of interviews was determined by the criteria of saturating the information. (Brinkmann, 2013) The number of interviews sufficient for reaching saturation is typically between 4 and 9 (Voicu & Croitoru, 2023: p. 172), and saturation on the main themes of interest for the current research was indeed achieved.

Table 1. Structure of the sample

Country	Gender	Age	Number of Children in Romania		Number of Children in UK/DE		Marital status	Type of recruitment
			minor	18+	minor	18+		
UK	Male	42	1	n/a	n/a	n/a	Married	Facebook
UK	Male	38	1	n/a	n/a	n/a	Married	Word-of-mouth
UK	Male	40	1	n/a	n/a	n/a	Divorced	Facebook
UK	Male	43	2	n/a	n/a	n/a	Married	Facebook
UK	Female	44	2	n/a	n/a	n/a	Divorced	Word-of-Mouth
DE	Male	43	1	n/a	n/a	n/a	Married	Facebook
DE	Female	45	n/a	1	n/a	2	Divorced	Facebook
DE	Female	45	n/a	1	n/a	n/a	Married	Facebook
DE	Female	46	1	n/a	n/a	n/a	Married	Facebook
DE	Female	41	1	n/a	n/a	n/a	Married	Facebook

In the interview, parents' voices are revealed in an attempt to capture the way they engage in transnational parenthood and how they build their identity as a parent in a transnational context, but also with a view to capturing their attitudes towards the Romanian state and politics in Romania. The interview guide specified in this respect several themes: (triggers for migrating, relationship with the child back in the home country, life in the host country, interest in politics in home country, satisfaction with life, plans for the future). The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were carried out between 11.06.2021 and 7.02.2022 over video-conferencing software. All interviewees were informed about the intentions to use their anonymized sayings and consented to have their interview recorded. Once the interviews were conducted, the transcription and coding of the interview material was performed by 4 intern students. The coding system is developed thematically. Each interview was coded by at least two students, and the pairs of students were randomly allocated per interview, so that all possible combinations between students were achieved, and their frequency was almost the same. Inter-coder reliability checks proved the reliability of the coders. Also, all codes proved to be reliable (they were consistently selected by interviews, irrespective of the coders).

In this way, I follow a solution to depict qualitative information that is also used in other studies. (Salamosnka, 2018). In the final section, I bring together all the interviews and show how the information that was collected in this way supports the initial hypothesis.

The final products provided the available material for me to run the analysis on, as depicted in the following chapters.

I have chosen to use vignettes to depict the experiences of the interviewees, as they help provide a clear picture of both the actual lived experience as a Romanian migrant, but also as a hypothetical case, in which the transnational parent would bring their child to the country where they are currently based. As noted by scholars: "Vignettes provide a valuable technique for exploring people's perceptions, beliefs and meanings about specific situations, and are especially useful for sensitive areas of inquiry that

may not be readily assessable through other means.” (Barter and Renold, 1999)

Vignettes are used for “highlighting the key themes, and interweaving quotes from the participants,” which is done “in a manner that captures the richness, depth, and complexity of the life histories.”¹⁰ of the interviewees. Each vignette is like a small case study of the situation that the interviewee finds themselves in and it allows for the exploration of the individual’s inner world with respect to a potentially sensitive life situation. Living with the uncertainty of both their life as a migrant and as a transnational parent, places the interviewee in a rather sensitive situation, exploring their discomfort, pain of being away from their loved ones, as well as, in some cases, potential disappointment with their current life situation and future prospects.

¹⁰ <https://atlasti.com/research-hub/life-history-research>

Uncertainty of Transnational Parenthood¹¹

Among the salient factors that shape changes in nowadays societies, one may notice two fundamental processes. None of them are new, but they embrace new forms in contemporary societies. On the one hand, there is a tangible phenomenon, in the sense that its visibility cannot be contested. We have coined it international migration, that is cross-border mobility of people. Human migration was always present in societies, being seen as a permanent trait of the evolution of mankind (Manning, Trimmer, 2020). In today's society it is not only everywhere but it has become as visible as during the days of the Roman empire, although it has not increased overall (Schrover, 2022): migrants settle(d) everywhere, leading to a mixture of ethnicities, habits, culinary preferences and smells, wealth of clothes and sounds, that make the world less monotonous, less familiar to those preferring traditional stances. Migration is also permanent, never definitive, being depicted as fluid by excellence (Engbersen, 2018).

On the other hand, there is the tendency to stress individual preferences against collective ones, to de-normalize society, to have divergent lifestyles and preferences coexisting in the same collectivist space (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). Scholars named the new order as "risk-society" (Beck, 1992), that bases its order on a certain predisposition, higher than in previous ages, to cope with uncertainty.

¹¹ An early version of this chapter was published as an article titled The Uncertainty of Transnational Parenthood in *Revista de Asistentă Socială*, anul XXIII, nr. 2/2024, pp. 15-25.

Both the prevalence of migration in the everyday life of societies, and the increasing presence of uncertainty among the dominant lifestyle are pushing individuals and societies towards a new definition of risks and normal patterns. In particular, migration tends to redefine for some migrants their regular behaviours and structures, including the functioning of basic institutions, such as family and parenthood (Ducu, 2018). Parenthood is the focus of this research, and in particular how people cope with transnational parenthood is our main research question. We expect to observe higher stress, leading to more uncertainty in everyday life that adds to the difficulties of those who deal with long-distance parenting.

To test the hypothesis, we employ a set of interviews with Romanian transnational parents. Our subjects are Romanians migrated to Germany and the UK, and living separated from their minor children, not due to couple dissolution, but as consequence of familial choices related to working abroad. Such people live in transnational families (TNFs) that share common familial traits but spread over the borders of at least two different states (Mazzucato, Dito, 2018). The data was collected between 2021 and 2022 and covers a period in which individuals faced Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic which further add to potential uncertainty.

In the following sections, we develop our argument based on insights from existing literature on risk and transnational parenthood, and we explain how the Romanian outmigration provides an excellent playground to assess uncertainty in the case of TNFs.

Then we introduce the data and show vignettes of our interviews, stressing how their situation is one of uncertainty. In the end, we discuss implications for policy and counselling, following the idea that dealing with uncertainty is an essential part of nowadays social work (Carling et al., 2012; Leifsen, Tymczuk, 2012; Smeeton, O'Connor, 2020).

Literature

Risk and conceptions of dealing with risk are central to everyday life (Lupton, 2013). Individuals and societies base their existence on fixed points

that delimit their lives and allow to build upon in conditions of relative certainty (Douglas, 1986; Stalker, 2003). Dealing with what is certain and what is not predictable becomes therefore a key element in shaping the conceptions of how life and the world are working. Changing these conceptions towards uncertainty in the history of mankind is a central point in theories of modernization (Inglehart, 1990, 2018; Voicu, 2001). Their claim is that in traditional societies, people could undertake only low risks since they had no strong anchors to act as a safety net. However, with economic development, technological advancements, and higher material stability, people were able to deal with higher levels of risk, and to get in more and more unusual situations. The question one may raise is how much uncertainty is too much, and whether being a transnational parent adds to perceived uncertainty. Our answer is that TNFs should experience higher uncertainty, as explained in the following.

Understanding how transnational families actually work allows developing the explanation. In his seminal work on transnationalism, Vertovec (2009) makes an extensive effort to bring conceptual clarity to the term as well as to problematize the concepts of transnationalism and migrant transnationalism. For the purpose of this paper the focus will be placed on his clarification of migrant transnationalism. For Vertovec migrant transnationalism is „a broad category referring to a range of practices and institutions linking migrants, people and organizations in their homelands or elsewhere in a diaspora” Vertovec (2009). Discussing the concept in a more recent light, given the fairly new term of transnationalism, Vertovec notes that transnational connections have existed since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries including in the case of families, who albeit split, maintained strong emotional ties and who also kept in touch with their families in their home countries through letters and remittances as well, the latter being „spent on both consumption and investment” (Vertovec, 2009, 13). While these patterns of cross-national interaction are thus not new, what is new are the breadth, intensity and speed at which migrants can retain and nurture their bonds with the families they leave behind.

This is rendered possible through the advances in technology and „inexpensive and frequent modes of travel, which have allowed for

continuous and real-time communication within global migrant networks". (Vertovec, 2009, 14) For the specific purpose of looking at family transnational ties Vertovec distinguishes between „great transnationalism" which refers to the state and the economy and „little transnationalism" the one that looks at family and households. He also mentions „linear" transnationalism as a form of transnationalism that is „based on affective ties to others in a place of origin". Therefore, in the case of transnational parenthood, one may speak of a narrow, linear type of transnationalism that shapes family life in the country of origin but also the cross-national type of relationship between carers and dependents.

Migration is listed as one of the most important elements of societal change in a postmodern world, leading to the transnationalization of family life among other things (Voicu, 2019). The author underlines circulatory migration as one of the defining and more and more common types of migration in Eastern European societies, in which migrants leave their country of origin only to return and to then leave again either for the same country or a different one. This can impact the way in which transnational families are formed and maintained, a phenomenon in which one or both parents find themselves in a position to leave abroad to work and to thus help financially support the family left behind.

In such cases, the children are thought to suffer from neglect and abandonment, which affects their participation in school and emotional development, however, a number of studies conducted in Romania indicate that school performance is not affected to a great extent by the migration of one or both parents. This holds true for their emotional development as well (Voicu, 2019). But parents are also exposed to risks of losing or loosening their ties with their children back home, as they embark on a journey that fundamentally changes their lifestyle and their way of parenting, as well as changing the notion and type of family life they lead.

The journey parents embark on comes with high degrees of uncertainty, especially if they leave their country without having secured work first. Moreover "individual competition and mobility, which are required for the realm of production, run up against the contrary demand in the family:

sacrifice for the other and absorption in the collective communal project of the family” (Beck, 2009, 107) These parents, then are required to come up with new ways of embracing their role within the family, which in the context of mobility is only more prone to increase the degree of uncertainty that they are exposed to.

Whether the parents’ degree of uncertainty impacts on the quality of their transnational parenthood’ abilities is a question that needs further exploring. In their attempt to conceptualize transnational parenting, Bonizzoni and Boccagni (2013) look at family relations in an interaction-based way through the notions of care and circulation. “In principle, the notion of care circulation aptly stands for this mixture of distance and proximity – that is, for all day-to-day attempts to socially and emotionally bridge the former and re-establish the latter.” (Bonizzoni, Boccagni, 2013, 10) With regards to the geographical area of study, they note that “as far as Europe as a receiving context is concerned much more attention should be given to transnational family life in the “new” women-led flows from the Eastern part of the continent [...] Eastern European migration deserves better elaboration in a perspective of transnational care circulation”, which reinforces the need for more studies in this field.” (Bonizzoni, Boccagni, 2013, 13)

Care is usually conceived as offered in person, especially when it comes to families. “Primary care relations, in particular, are not sustainable over time without love labour, and the realisation of love, as opposed to the declaration of love, requires work. Love labouring is affectively-driven and involves at different times and to different degrees, emotional work, mental work, cognitive skills and physical work” (Lynch, Baker, Lyons, 2009, 36) These are intimately linked to family life which requires presence. Yet in the absence of physical presence caring becomes something that needs to transform and be conveyed through different means between the carer, in this case the transnational parent and their child, the cared for. This too then becomes uncertain when distance intervenes and care can no longer be provided in a classical way.

Romanian migration was virtually null in the 1980s, started to exist in the 1990s, and boomed in the 2000s and 2010s (Deliu, 2015; Sandu, 2005, 2017;

Şerban, 2011) Emigration and mobility of the scale that Romania has experienced in the past decade is built primarily on the assumption of strong economic dissatisfaction accompanied by the drive to escape a “dysfunctional social model” (Collier, 2014) leading to either a “circulatory” or “permanent” exit option. Romanians represent “the fifth largest group of immigrants in OECD countries” (Doiciar, Cretan, 2021). Various outcomes immediately resulted, from a resource to modernize the country (Sandu, 2010), to a new electoral body to deal with (Doiciar, Cretan, 2021; Gherghina, Tap, Soare, 2022).

Transnational parenthood is a consequence of this mobility and comes with a set of unique challenges and characteristics, as the boundaries of family are redrawn. Debates around the challenges of children left behind accompanied the phenomenon (Botezat, Pfeiffer, 2020; Ducu, 2018; Ducu, Nedelcu, Telegdi-Csetri, 2018; Tomşa, Jenaro, 2015).

Romanian families witnessed a great shift in the set up and living conditions, as observed also by the state’s devised role in addressing the situation of children whose parents have left to work and live in the EU. For instance, The Romanian President has called in 2016 for a taskforce to be established, with the explicit aim to report on the situation of children left behind. Reports were considered needed to be submitted regularly in order to assess the impact and address the subsequent measures in order to compensate for the parents’ absence.

Such attention received from the public debate and political environment becomes part of the context in which TNFs exist. This adds to the initial decisions to move due to economic and societal uncertainty, and to an initial perception regarding the lack of action from the state in terms of migration policy (Şerban, 2009), to be slightly revised in more recent days (Şerban, Croitoru, 2018). Even return migrations proved to be just a stage towards future remigrations (Tufiş, Sandu, 2023), adding to the uncertainty, and depicting the liquidity of migration (Engbersen, 2018).

Research question

Up to now we have argued that contemporary societies are more prone to have risks in the immediate vicinity, not in terms of personal insecurities, but defined by the non-normative set up of late modern societies. The “risk society” label coined by Ulrich Beck defines contemporary life and can be interpreted as exposed to doing things differently all the time. This means giving up the normative lifestyles that acted as anchors in more traditional set-ups. We added mobility in itself as a risk-bearing action, and its consequence is a liquid state. Within the Romanian context, transnational parents have to face initial discontent towards society and state, along with public debates related to the situation of children in TNFs, that were also stressed by the novelty of both migration and changes towards late modernity.

In such a set up, we expect that transnational parenthood becomes a stressful state, in which uncertainty is strongly felt.

Method

A set of ten in-depth interviews were carried out in 2021-2022 with Romanian immigrants in the United Kingdom (UK) and Germany, who were in a situation of transnational parenthood. Each interviewee is briefly introduced in the section devoted to the findings of this article. The subjects were self-selected from Facebook (FB) Romanian groups abroad, and the interviews were conducted online using videoconferencing tools (Zoom). The interviews focused on challenges faced by Romanian transnational parents, and on their attitudes towards the Romanian and host society, as well as considering political and civic participation, both in the host country and in Romania. The sample is homogeneous with respect to age: all respondents were in their 40s, except one who is 38. The group includes both men and women, mainly highly skilled.

In the following section, we consider the cases of each of our respondents, depict them, and stress how they migrated (alone/ with partner/ family etc.),

when, where; their marital and parental life course; the frequency of them visiting their children/ verbal contact/ video/ chat etc.; the perceived difficulties to being involved in transnational parenting; the plans to overcome such difficulties.

We introduce the situation of each of our interviewees as vignettes that illustrate their situation, drawing conclusions upon common patterns in the end.

Findings

DE1 (male, aged 43) left Romania 7 years before the interview. He was working as manager of a county department of a major Romanian insurance company. He invokes the disappointment with Romanian society as reason for leaving and indicates receiving a lower income after arriving to Germany. He keeps in constant contact with his wife and daughter (almost 18 years at the time of the interview), talking every day on Facebook Messenger; they visited him, but did not adapt to Germany, where he finds 'psychological comfort'. The situation is not complicated: the man has a decent life; employed as middle-manager in a delivery company, he does not gain as much as in Romania, but can afford playing golf, swimming, writing books, and volunteering for an association that aims to help Romanians to integrate in Germany, and for a Romanian-language newspaper addressed to Romanians in Germany. He meets his family during the holidays, when he comes back to Romania, and follows his daughter from abroad, waiting for her to start her studies in the US. He displays serenity in his interview and leaves no impression of suffering due to distance or having any plan to reunite with family. The family relations are apparently strong, marked by constant communication, but intentions to spend time together are completely missing. To sum up, DE1 is quite unemotional about his family. The constant contact over Internet seems sufficient for his emotional needs, and he dedicates most energy to self-express.

DE2 (female, aged 45) works as a nurse in Germany, and has three older children, aged 24, 21, and 20 respectively. Initially she left for Austria, in 2012, in order to improve the financial situation of the family, upon agreement with her former husband. She was in circulatory migration: two months working abroad, as a home caretaker, two months at home. In the meanwhile, she studied in a school for medical nurses, while the older boy also studied to become a nurse. The boy graduated one year before DE2 and moved to Germany. The middle daughter also moved to Germany, while the younger daughter is still in Romania, she is a student in a school for medical nurses and working. At a certain point she divorced. She explains that 'distance, repeatedly leaving, led to the deterioration of the couple relationship'. Otherwise, she communicates almost daily on a WhatsApp group with her children. DE2 does not have an extensive network of friends. She interacts with other Romanians in her locality, but she mentions the need for caution in such relations, showing clear mistrust towards others. She does not feel at home in Germany but plans to remain here for the next ten years, and then to return to Romania, but there is no specific intention on what to do after returning. Overall, DE2 leaves the impression of a person that tries to show balance but has rather a range of personal insecurities and uncertainty with respect to her own way.

DE3 (female, aged 44), graduated from only lower secondary education (8 grades), and she had two daughters, but one died young, while the other is 26. She left Romania for Spain after she divorced, leaving her daughter with her sister, returned for a short while and then came in Germany seven years ago. In the meantime, she remarried. She mentions the need for a better life as the reason for leaving, and difficulties to gain money. 'I raised my daughter over the telephone' is the definition that she gives to her relationship with the child, indicating the times when she had three jobs, and sent money home for her daughter. She indicates private tutoring for her daughter as part of the expenses and indicates her daughter's graduation from high school as a performance. The daughter currently works in a dentistry practice, is also a student in a school for medical nurses, has a small daughter and is separated from her former partner. DE3 meets her daughter

and granddaughter once a year, and ‘thanks god, we have messenger’, that is used for daily talking. She says that her daughter and niece cannot come to Germany, given that the father of the niece gives no permission for relocation 1. DE3’s daily routine includes almost exclusively working and house chores. She mentions meeting friends from time to time, mainly her sister, who now lives nearby. Overall, DE3’s life is a long history of struggling to adapt to a circulatory migration lifestyle, and to keep contact with her daughter and granddaughter.

DE4 (female, aged 45) has a boy – aged 16, from her first marriage. Initially, she studied sciences at BA and MA level. During her MA studies, she received a scholarship in Germany, where she went back yearly between 1999 and 2014, to visit her godmother. In the meanwhile, she also graduated with an economics degree, and started to work in banking, in her hometown. This was her job between 2002 and 2014, earning even more than 5000 Euro before the recession in the end of 2000s. When the bank closed its Romanian branch in 2014, she was earning 1500 EURO net per month, and she was not able to find a similar job in banking. Therefore, she undertook setting up a restaurant, but the workload quickly became overwhelming, with even 16 hour workdays. Her son, who was 7 at the time, switched from amateur dancing to professional dancing (that he started when aged 4), commuting often to Germany for training.

While spending 3 weeks in Germany, 3 weeks in Romania, she quit the restaurant, found a job, came to Germany in 2015 to learn German and secure the job, but met her current husband immediately after arrival. She mentions all the search as resulting from the need for money to ensure her child’s dancing training. The couple relation with her former husband was already deteriorating from 2009. DE4 remains in Germany, the boy stays in Romania and quits dancing, and they talk even ‘20 times a day’, with the child visiting his mother at least 4-6 times a year. In Germany, DE4 quit the job for which she needed German, because it implied working on a cruise ship, and becomes a housewife. Then, she worked in a hotel. She started as a cleaner but learning better German she gradually climbed the job ladder, to switch

to another company, where she gets a job in financing in 2019. She integrates into the local society through her husband and his friends, but also through the Romanian community in her area. She is still involved in the life of her former family, keeping contact with her former husband. Her parents moved to Bucharest, where her former husband's job was relocated in 2019, and she helps them managing in Romania's capital by using her former colleagues from university who live there. The constant contact with her son seems enough for her current needs, while the plan is that the boy will apply for university studies in Germany.

DE5 (female, aged 41) had been in Germany for 2 years at the time of interviewing. Her boy was 11 and living in Romania. DE5 was born in Southern Romania, went to university in Transylvania, worked for 20 years in marketing, in a transnational company in Bucharest. She says that she felt suffocated in Bucharest, and after divorcing she was left alone with her son, to manage. After four years she re-marries, and leaves to Germany. She intended to take the child to Germany, but her former husband refuses to give her permission to move the child to Germany. The boy comes to visit her during the holidays. Her former husband had worked abroad for two years during their marriage, so the child was living only with DE5, his mother, for a couple of years. DE5 says that she always wanted to escape Bucharest and wanted to move to Germany where her sister lives. However, "... at a certain point I have started a relation with a friend of a colleague that was living in Germany for six years, so this is how I got to Germany, it was not a choice." She blames the Romanian authorities for not being able to take the child with her and shows real signs of suffering in this respect: "It was very difficult. I did not leave thinking that I leave without my child, but I had to leave him. [...] It was a shock from staying with [my son] permanently to ... not knot knowing anything from one moment to another. I had no idea what he does, what he eats, how he sleeps, how he feels, how he is in school, and it was terrible, and I have tried not to be completely disconnected. I remained enrolled in the [WhatsApp] groups of parents, in contact with the schoolteacher..." Two years ago, she filed a lawsuit against her former husband, who is the caretaker of the child (legally, they share custody). The

process was still in court when collecting the interview. She constantly blames the pressure that her husband puts on the boy and reports monosyllabic daily conversations with her boy. Otherwise, integration into Germany seems to work smoothly, being related mainly to Romanians in the area where she lives. She also keeps contact with her mother, arranging medical care for her in Romania, and works with an NGO in her hometown. In DE5's interview, the dominating mood is sadness, both with respect to Romanian society, in general, and with her own situation with respect to her parenthood. She seems divided between the joy of living in a society that she likes, and the child left behind for an indefinite period.

UK1 (man, 40 years old), lives in England, is divorced, and has an 8-year-old son in Romania. He left Romania in 2018 because of the corruption and because he felt that nothing would change for the better. He has lived abroad in Greece and Italy. He is in touch with his son daily, his son shows him what he does at school and before the pandemic, he would see his son every 4 months in person. He is a member of the USR party (Uniunea Salvați România – Save Romania Union) and follows Romanian news and developments in Romanian politics. He seems to be well integrated in the UK and has friends of different nationalities. He is financially secure and satisfied on a material level but misses his son and regrets that he is missing his son's childhood. He wants to bring his son over to the UK for University and imagines himself in the UK in the next 5 years.

Overall, he seems to be in a stable, secure position.

UK2 (man, 38 years old), married, lives in England and has an 11 year old son in Romania who lives with his grandmother (UK2's mother). Left Romania in 2016. Could not have pictured himself a migrant before leaving but could not make ends meet based on his earnings in Romania. He lives with his wife and sees his son once a year and keeps in touch via social media, he intends to bring his son over this year (2021). They keep in touch daily and he helps him with his homework. He sees no future in Romania, but would like to return to the country, he doesn't know whether he will stay in the UK for the next five years. His wife wants to buy a house in the UK,

and he applied for permanent residence but says that he doesn't know where he will be. He fears that he has gotten used to life in the UK but is excited every time he returns to Romania to visit his son. Overall, UK2 is uncertain about his future, unable to indicate whether he will be in the UK in the next 5 years or not, despite his intention to bring his child over to the UK.

UK3 (man, 43 years old), married, lives in England, has 2 children of 9 and 6 years, his family is in Romania. He left Romania in December 2020 with a job in the pharmaceutical industry after receiving an offer from a foreign company. He thinks he was living a good life in Romania but since 2018 has felt that things are not headed in the right direction. He has not returned to Romania since he left, mainly because of the pandemic and quarantine rules. Keeps in touch with his children on a daily basis, helps his eldest with homework. Once he moves his family from Romania, he says there is nothing to keep him connected to the country. Does not trust Romanian politics and Romanian politicians. He was a Plus Party member but quit. He is sure that he will not return to Romania but is not sure about whether he will be in the UK for the next 5 years, as he intends to move to a Nordic country. He is convinced that his future is outside Romania but is not sure whether it will be in the UK. Overall, UK3 is in a currently stable job and financial situation, but intends to leave the UK with his family, if given the opportunity. He is sure to not return to Romania anymore, so will continue living as a migrant for the foreseeable future.

UK4 (man, 42 years old), divorced and re-married, lives in England, has a 12-year-old son who lives in Romania. Worked as a paramedic with the Emergency Situations Inspectorate but resigned in 2013 after 7 years because he was discontent with the working environment. In 2013 he moved to London and he remarried and set up his own business. Prior to this migration experience he also tried seasonal work in Portugal, Germany, France, and Italy to make ends meet but would always return to Romania. After moving to the UK, he would visit his son once a year, sometimes twice a year. He keeps in touch daily with his son, they talk every day, but at the

beginning it was difficult to establish a connection with him, because he felt abandoned. He sends money back to help support him. He stays abreast of the political situation in Romania, follows the news and different TV shows, but thinks that the Romanian state does not care about the diaspora. He seems to want to stay in the UK, also because of the pension contributions he has paid and intends to bring his son over in the next 5 years, he's discussed this with his son's mother as well. Financially he is content in the UK, but he thinks that he would have been happier in Romania from a personal perspective, as he would have been closer to his family, his parents, and his son. Overall, he is in a stable situation currently, with prospects of there being a stable foreseeable future as well.

UK5 (woman, 43 years old), two daughters who live in Romania. She left Romania for the UK in February 2015. She left with her husband at the time because of financial constraints. With two daughters in Romania, she has been spending half her time in the UK and half in Romania, she works as a live-in carer and gets plenty of time off to return to Romania. Sometimes she spends 4 weeks in the UK and 4 in Romania, or 6 weeks in the UK and 2 in Romania, her schedule varies. She is therefore not truly integrated in the UK. She keeps in touch daily with her daughters and talks to them on WhatsApp. She stays in touch with Romania via news but doesn't feel that she can influence what goes on very much, despite voting. She also doesn't think that the Romanian state cares very much about the diaspora. She is uncertain about what her future will bring and cannot declare herself satisfied with the current state of her affairs. Her eldest daughter would like to go to University in London, but she cannot say whether she will be in the UK in the next 5 years or not. She declared that with the pandemic she has felt very tired and wishes to change jobs but does not know what she could do instead. Because she does not actually live in the UK it is difficult for her to envisage living there in the future. Overall, her lifestyle and life are characterized by a high degree of uncertainty about the future.

Discussion

In most of the case studies that we have exposed, the desire instead of claim to search for a better life for children is core to the initial decision to migrate. Contact with the children is often mediated by technology and fragmented. The relation with the partner seems weak, and often we observe the dissolution of the couple. Sometimes, separation precedes or takes place simultaneously with the decision to migrate.

Most of the interviewees did not report or show any anxiety related to their distancing from the children. They found substitutes in communicating via Messenger or WhatsApp and indicate daily routines to keep contact and be part of their children's lives. They rarely refer to the emotional needs of their children.

Nevertheless, during the interviews we did not ask direct questions on how they think about the needs of their children, so we have recorded only what the interviewees spontaneously mentioned as being essential. However, in the case of strong feelings related to the emotional needs of their children or even of the interviewees' own emotions, such feelings should have sprung up during the conversations.

Financial uncertainty was not an issue. Practically all interviewees were financially stable, not giving any sign of material stress, despite at least half of them arguing that financial difficulties, in particularly related to children, were the main engine for them to leave Romania. Several interviewees mentioned saving money for their children's university studies.

Couple uncertainty is also not reported as stressful, but there are signs that couple relationships do not always work. First, transnational parenthood is not necessarily correlated with tensions within the couple. Most interviewees report having a stable couple life, regardless of whether they are divorced or not, and their stories confirm this. Also, interviewees do not display elements of couple uncertainty. They know where they are, how they build their family life, and how they embed parental responsibilities. However, as one interviewee stressed: 'distance, repeatedly leaving led to the deterioration of the couple relationship'.

Parental uncertainty is also low. As mentioned, parents cope with their situation through daily-basis communication over the Internet and mobile phone, visiting their children or receiving their visit, and mainly through planning to bring children over to their country of residence, mainly arguing that it is better for their educational outcomes.

Uncertainty is present however when considering the future. Most interviewees display some doubts about where they will be located 5 years from now. The majority does not imagine returning to Romania, but they also could not tell where they will be. The liquidity of migration mixes in this case with the parental duties. All of the interviewees want their children to study or relocate abroad, but most could not tell when and where such plans can be put in practice.

Therefore, the presence of children becomes a game changer. While financial and marital/coupling risks are bearable, parenthood adds uncertainty to an otherwise stable situation. Living in a different society than the one of origin, the confrontation with late modernity risks leave only a small trace on financial stability and belonging, showing that basic needs are met. However, children are less likely to provide a stable pathway to current set-ups. This is likely to create a need for counselling in case of both children and parents in TNFs situations. Social workers could intervene preemptively in cases of transnational parenthood, with advice on the matter, providing support for discussing the future pathways for children and parents. It is likely that when the children grow up, the current uncertainty related to their future to transform in even stronger one and even into resentment if the expectations towards educational and professional career, including location of these careers, are not met. This is the typical case in which social work literature mentions that current social workers should be confronted with uncertainty in their professional life. Therefore, dealing with the issue is a must.

On a societal level, given the interest and the high debate around children left behind, one may find a space for further researching the implication for migrants and TNFs as political bodies. Exploiting their children- and

parenthood-related uncertainties could provide space for populist parties to raise their votes. However, this is subject to future research.

A few limitations could affect the strength of our findings. During COVID-19, uncertainties added to the challenges of transnational parenthood. This might have increased the actual stress related to children, but it is unlikely to have greatly affected the validity of our findings. The interviewees reported changes only in the frequency of visits among family members, nothing else being changed by the pandemic restrictions. Finally, we also face the limitation of interviewing only the transnational parent, not the children or the other parent(s). However, given our interest in transnational parenthood seen from the perspective of the transnational parent, this is less of an obstacle when considering the results reported in this paper.

The interviewees and their political stances given their individual context¹²

In this chapter, I delve into each of the interviews in order to provide an in-depth account of the experience and stances of the transnational parents under study. The focus goes to three major themes: family life, integration in the communities of the country of residence, political stance with respect to Romanian society. For each interviewee, I depict their stories as they were told, and I provide insights on the resented uncertainty regarding the above three themes. In the end, I comment on the co-presence of the observed positionings of the three mentioned main themes.

One might be tempted to analyse the interviews by themes; however this would not be useful. Let's suppose I introduce first the family situation of the sample of interviewees, then I present their political stances, and then again I discuss the theme of community integration. This strategy would allow me to understand the overall distribution of the sample; however it would fail to assess the intricate relationships between these three themes, which are the main argument of my thesis. Individual uncertainty is integrated into family life, community integration and everyday encounters, all these are likely to be reflected in political stances. Therefore, the focus is

¹² This chapter was published in the paper titled Transnational parents, uncertainty and anti-system political preferences published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices issue 2/2025.

on the iteration between the themes, which means that we need to consider each case individually.

First interviewee, DE1

DE1 (male, aged 43) had left Romania seven years prior to the interview and had maintained a long-distance relationship with his family, both his daughter and his wife. He has an 18-year old daughter who lives in Romania. He left Romania though he had held a good position within an insurance company and was earning a good amount of money, but he left because he needed to make a loan in Swiss Francs and pay it back. The decision to leave to Germany was a family-based one, but he does admit that it was a circumstantial decision to leave to Germany, where he found a certain degree of mental comfort which he lacked in Romania. He keeps in touch daily with his daughter on Messenger and by telephone, he declares that it is a normal family relationship, only that he is far. He expressed no open regret with regards to his family life situation and mentioned that he has no intention of bringing his daughter to Germany as she had been accepted to study in the UK and the US. He noted that he would support her choice to study wherever she wanted, and did not list Germany as a country where she would live.

The interviewee was very involved in the life of the Romanian community in Germany, writing for a local Romanian language newspaper and volunteered for a Romanian association helping Romanian migrants coming to Germany. He also stated that he had Romanian friends whom he spent time with. He stated that he read and followed what was happening in Romania via online media channels but that he did not follow closely Romanian politics. He did however mention that he thought that the Romanian state was only interested in the condition of Romanians living abroad during electoral campaigns and went on to say that he has noticed that there are programs encouraging Romanians to return back to their home country, but expressed a strong belief that Romanian politics did not reward

performance or meritocracy, and that it was rather political appointments, that were not necessarily backed up by meritocracy that were most common.

When asked whether he felt drawn to any particular party or politician, he said that he was not and that he strongly believed in the need for electoral reform, so that the best party may win and lead, rather than the current set up where one voted for one party, such as the National Liberal Party(PNL), and in the end it would be the Social Democratic Party(PSD) ruling. This was the case when voting for PSD, which was then ruling alongside PNL, though the two parties did not share any ideological stances. The interviewee had voted in the 2020 Parliamentary elections, declaring that he had voted for the National Liberal Party.

The interviewee declared that he was not particularly happy with his living condition, specifically his material gains, but that he was satisfied with the fact that he was engaged in research and writing activities which he saw as rewarding, even though they brought no financial gains.

He did see his future as taking place in Germany within five years' time or potentially in Switzerland. He did not express any intention of not at family reunification nor any regret regarding his current family situation.

Commentary: The interviewee's family situation was stable, and he seemed to be content with his involvement in the life of the community in his host country. He did not manifest any regret or remorse regarding his long-distance relationship with his child, and he expressed a preference for traditional, mainstream political parties in Romania. A relative balance between family life situation and community involvement leads to mainstream party support.

Table 2. A summary of the first interview

Theme	Stance
Family	A certain balance regarding the family relations and transnational situation

Theme	Stance
Community	Actively involved with the local Romanian communities
Political stance	Sees no need to change the political system and tends to vote with mainstream parties

Second interviewee, DE2

DE2 (female, 45) is a mother of three, with her youngest daughter, 19, living in Romania. She is a nurse and divorced for several years, while having lived for another several years in Germany. She had first left Romania in 2012 when her youngest daughter was in the third grade (approximately 9/10 years old) and had decided, together with her husband, that it was best for one of them to leave Romania and seek employment elsewhere.

She had first left to Austria where she worked for seven years in the medical system, after which she decided to attend nurse school and aspire to do more. The relationship with her husband deteriorated, but the one with her children remained quite strong, the money she sent home helped with her children's education, allowing for her eldest son to attend nursing school and leave to Germany. In her case, the decision to leave to Germany was a family-driven decision. Her migration experience while in Austria, had primarily been a circulatory one, when she worked one month in Austria and stayed two months in Romania, but this had proven unsustainable and so she decided to leave for longer periods of time.

The interviewee describes her relationship with her daughter as close, as she has sought to encourage her to develop her personality and has permanently been in contact with her, they talk on a daily basis, including face timing every few days, but they are overall very closely in touch. She expressed regret at not being able to see her very often, stating that it is rather painful to not be able to see your own child but she acknowledged that the circumstances were such that she could not change that.

The interviewee described working long hours and having a very demanding schedule, she admitted to not always feeling good in Germany because she did not feel at home, with those she loved close to her, or even

having closer relationships with her neighbours back in Romanian. She did have some Romanian acquaintances but was not very close to them.

She reported that she watched the news in Romania and that she was very interested in what was happening back in the country, expressing concern and worrying over the wellbeing of those close to her back home. While she did not express a high level of interest in politics in Romania, she did express disappointment and that she thought that the Romanian state showed very little interest in the situation of Romanians living abroad.

She acknowledged that the diaspora supported much of the Romanian economy. She did not feel like there was any party or any politician that she was particularly drawn to, because she expressed that she could not identify any politician who would really keep his word and do something good for the people. However, she had voted in the 2020 elections but could not remember which party she had voted for.

When it came to her future plans, she noted that she wanted to spend the following ten years in Germany and then return to Romania, but that she would like to change her job upon returning. She expressed certainty at the thought of bringing her daughter to Germany, where she could offer her the support needed to set up a life there and to decide on her own when or whether she would return to Romania.

Table 3. A summary of the second interview

Theme	Stance
Family	Dominated by regrets, pain and uncertainty
Community	Uninvolved, no ties to the community she lived in
Political stance	Disappointed with Romanian politics, explicitly anti-system

Commentary: The interviewee was clearly affected by her inability to be with her daughter back in Romania, despite their long-distance relationship which she had tried to maintain at a close level. She did not feel particularly well integrated in her host country and she missed her country of origin very

much, expressing uncertainty about whether she would return to Romania or not. Politically, she had expressed disappointment at the political class, indicating an anti-system stance. An uncertain family situation and no involvement in the community lead to an anti-system party preference.

Third interviewee, UK1

UK1(male, 40). The interviewee lived in the UK, was divorced and had an 8 year old son in Romania. He noted that he left Romania not out of economic necessity, he had worked in several companies and had traveled abroad for work but felt that he could not bring any positive change to the environment he worked in because of a strong resistance to change. He had initially chosen the UK to pursue his studies, he returned to Romania where he worked for two years in a good role within a company and after his contract ended he decided to return to the UK because he liked his time there very much. He had left to the UK three years prior to the interview, but this had not been his first migration experience, he had also been to Greece and Italy for longer periods of time.

Since he left he had returned to Romania several times and taken the child with him to the UK during holidays. He stated that he maintains a good relationship with his former wife and that the child is not aware that they are divorced. He keeps in touch daily, thanks to modern day technology and helps with homework, keeping in close touch with the child and they also met in person every four months.

He declared that he had a very busy schedule and that despite having friends he felt alone because he misses his child very much and that because of the time difference and his work schedule, there are days on which he cannot be in touch.

When asked about whether he keeps in touch with what goes on in Romania, the interviewee declared that he is very interested in what goes on and that he is very sad. He was an USR party member at the time and had voted for USRPLUS in the 2020 elections, although he did not express any preference towards a particular politician.

The interviewee also noted that he was involved in the life of the Romanian community in the UK, by attending Church masses. He had never felt discriminated against because of his nationality.

When asked about whether he was satisfied with his living conditions he said that although he did not lack anything material, he misses his son very much and is hurt that being in the UK has meant that he has had to miss his son's childhood. He had the longer-term picture in mind, thinking that his son might want to study abroad at university and go to the UK. He therefore confirmed that he wanted to bring his son to the UK, so that he would be able to support him to pursue his higher education in the UK.

Table 4. A summary of the third interview

Theme	Stance
Family	Uncertain, conceals the divorce to the son left behind, misses connection to the child
Community	Involved with the local Romanian community and attends Church masses
Political stance	Expresses sadness regarding Romanian politics. Member of USR

Commentary: The interviewee had had an uncertain family situation, as his son who was living in Romania, was unaware of the divorce between his parents. He expressed a lot of grief at the fact that he was far away from his son, despite him being fairly integrated in the community in the UK. He also expressed sadness at the state of Romanian politics, which he was actively involved in, having been an USR part member and voting for USR in the Parliamentary elections. An uncertain family situation, while being involved in the community indicates an anti-system party preference.

Fourth interviewee, DE3

DE3 (female, 45) had left in search for a better economic situation for herself and her children, so that they may study and build a better future, but acknowledged that they, the children suffer tremendously because of the long-distance set up. She had had two daughters, but her youngest daughter

had passed away 5 years before and now she had a 26 year- old daughter in Romania. Before leaving to Germany, she had previously left to Spain where she had managed to save some money, while leaving her children with her sister back in Romania, after the divorce from her husband. Following her experience in Spain she returned to Romania and then left to Germany with the help of a friend. She had been in Germany for 7 years at the time of the interview and had described her experience there as very difficult having had three jobs and supporting her daughter back home with all necessary costs for education. She had made the decision to leave to Germany on her own.

She stated that she was in daily touch with her daughter, thanks to Messenger and that it was rare for them to not be in touch on a daily basis. She had also remarried and brought her sister to Germany so that she did not feel as lonely, but she yearned for Romania and declared that home for her was Romania.

The interviewee stated that she followed the news from Romania on a daily basis but that she found the situation chaotic and expressed disappointment with how things were going. She recalled having queued to vote for the President but that nothing had changed. She also stated that she thought that the policies for Romanians abroad were non-existent, with the Romanian state expressing no interest in actually supporting Romanians abroad, despite declarations that “the diaspora should return”.

In terms of support for a given party of a specific politician the interviewee expressed support for the then leader of the USR Plus party, Dan Barna, and that she would have voted for USR had she decided to vote in the Parliamentary elections.

In terms of life satisfaction she expressed satisfaction with her financial situation but she expressed a deep sadness and pain regarding her family life. She also noted that she wanted to bring her daughter to Germany, but because of her daughter’s personal relationship with the child of her father that was not possible.

Table 5. A summary of the fourth interview

Theme	Stance
Family	Expresses a deep sadness, despite having a new family in the host country
Community	She basically lacks a social life
Political stance	Labeled as chaotic and producing disappointment. Accuses the Romanian state of lacking preoccupation with the diaspora.

Commentary: The interviewee expressed great difficulty regarding her family situation, with her daughter living in Romania. She missed her home country very much and expressed that although making efforts to not feel lonely, by bringing over her sister to Germany, she still felt Romania was home. She expressed a deep sadness regarding her family life. She expressed disappointment at how things unfolded politically, and stated that she would have voted for USR in the Parliamentary elections. An uncertain family life situation and no involvement in the community, lacking a social life, leads to an anti-system political stance.

Fifth interviewee, UK2

UK2 (male, 38). The interviewee had never intended to leave Romania but because of a period of harsh financial constraints he decided to follow a friend's suggestion to leave to the UK. He followed in the footsteps of other acquaintances he had come to know who had left for work and decided to give the migration experience a try.

He is married and had left his 11 year old son back in Romania with his mother. He described the experience of being a long-distance parent as painful, despite keeping in touch with the child on a daily basis. He saw his son in person only once a year, but had plans to bring him to the UK. He stated that in five years'time he saw himself in the UK and with his son, though he expressed concern at the education system in the UK, where he thought that children had too liberal of an experience and preferred Romania.

The interviewee did express uncertainty at whether he would still be in the UK in the following 5 years, though he had previously thought that he would not stay as long in the UK. He declared that during Covid he had stopped following the online news as much, only some TV, but declared that he had liked politics in general while living in Romania, though he could not have become a politician himself.

The interviewee had also expressed a preference toward a politician in Romania, namely former Prime Minister Ponta and he said that although he did not vote for the Parliamentary elections in 2020, he would have voted for USR, though were elections to be held again, he would not vote for them again.

In terms of life satisfaction, he stated that he was financially content but that otherwise he was not very content.

Commentary: The interviewee was uncertain about his family life, not knowing whether he would return to Romania within 5 years' time or stay in the UK. He was deeply affected by being a long-distance parent and did not declare being part of a community in the UK and declared that he would have voted for USR in the 2020 Parliamentary elections. An uncertain family situation coupled with no community involvement indicates a preference for anti-system parties, though the subject also expressed a preference for mainstream political figures.

Table 6. A summary of the fifth interview

Theme	Stance
Family	Depicts the long-distance parenthood as painful
Community	Uninvolved, no ties to the community
Political stance	Oscillates between mainstream and anti-system political preferences

Sixth interviewee, UK3

UK3(male, 43) The interviewee had recently left the country for work, leaving his wife and two children in Romania, but with the intention of bringing them to the UK. He had been headhunted by a UK company in the pharmaceutical field and he decided to relocate to the UK. Given the nature of his role in the pharmaceutical field, he had had the experience of working abroad for short periods of time, but he had never decided to migrate himself. He had made the decision to leave the country based on a conversation with his wife and decided to leave them for a short while. The children were aged 9 and 6 at the time of the interview.

The interviewee declared that since 2018 he had felt that Romania was heading in a wrong direction and he decided to start looking for jobs abroad. He had made the decision together with his wife and arrived in the UK in time to get presettled status. He described the decision to leave the country as the family's only chance to „escape” Romania and to offer his children better quality education and health services.

He stated that he was in daily touch with his family, his children and his wife, that he would help his eldest child do homework and play together online. He did mention that it was complicated to stay in touch, but that he would try to surprise his children with a package and that he was doing his best to be present in their lives. He also stated that he felt alone quite often, despite having made some acquaintances and friends in the UK.

The interviewee stated that he followed Romanian media daily, though he felt no connection to Romania, other than his immediate family. He also stated that he does not actively follow political life in the country, other than what he hears in the news and he expressed deep disappointment and lack of trust in Romanian politics. He had also come to know some politicians in Romania, but did not express a preference toward any politician in particular. He had been involved actively in politics by being a PLUS party member but had resigned once he had thought that the party was headed in a wrong direction, when they had merged with USR. The interviewee stated that the gap between what should be happening with the country and what

was actually taking place was too great, and that politicians were at best stopping the country from sinking further, rather than from making any real progress. He had voted in the Parliamentary elections with USRPlus, despite the fact that he did not think that USRPlus would bring a big change to the situation of Romanians in the diaspora.

He was uncertain about whether he would stay in the UK for longer than 5 years, as his intention was to move to one of the Nordic countries. He declared that he was very satisfied with his life, having worked in a field where he had performed his work diligently while in Romania. He was very content professionally as well as on a personal level.

Table 7. A summary of the sixth interview

Theme	Stance
Family	Stable, the interviewee would bring his family to the UK at a later date
Community	Involved, declared that he had some friends in the community
Political stance	Anti-system preference

Commentary: The interviewee had a stable family life, though he did express that it was complicated to stay in touch with his long-distance wife and children. He had become somewhat integrated in the community, but felt lonely without his family. He was uncertain about where he would be in five years' time. He had been actively involved in politics as a party member in an anti-system party, and had voted for USRPlus in the 2020 Parliamentary elections. The interviewee's family stability and a certain degree of community involvement expressed an anti-system party preference.

Seventh interviewee, UK4

UK4(male, 42). The interviewee had left Romania after quitting his job in the Emergency Unit Inspectorate within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and he

also divorced after the resignation. He stated that he no longer found himself aligned with the work that he was doing and decided to do something else rather than be a paramedic. He came to England in 2013 and stayed there ever since, although his son of 12 years of age was left in Romania. He remarried in England and started his own business and expressed contentment at having a schedule that allows him more freedom, financial stability and brings him satisfaction. England had been his first migration experience, although, he had travelled for up to a year for work to other countries Portugal, Germany, France and Italy. After the 2008 financial crisis he had become very affected by the aftermath of the crisis especially as he had taken a loan in Swiss Francs from the bank and had to struggle to pay it back. He made the decision to move to England by himself.

The interviewee said that he had visited Romania twice a year every year since he had left so that he could be in touch with his son, and not just send money back home. He keeps in touch with his son almost on a daily basis, though he admits that at the beginning his son felt abandoned by his father. He also expressed regret at missing some of the most important moments in his son's life up until the time of the interview, but excused himself by saying that due to his work schedule he had been unable to be there with him. He also stated that he helped him financially, not only because he was paying alimony following the divorce, but also because the expenses had grown higher.

He stated that he watches many different TV shows from Romania and so that he follows what is going on in the country, also by following online media. He stated that he thought that the National Liberal Party would bring about a change but that he thought that the Romanian state was not interested in Romanians abroad. He also did not express any preference toward any politician. Although he had not voted in the 2020 Parliamentary elections, he expressed a preference toward the Social-Democrats, as potential party that he would have voted for, as he associated the Party with a party that cared for Romanians and he associated the time during which PSD was in power with a prosperous time. Rethinking about the post-Communist political class, he stated that PSD had followed the interests of

Romanians and that had not followed its own interests unlike other parties, while also stating that other parties had poor leaders.

The interviewee stated that he intended to be in the UK in the next 5 years and beyond, especially given the fact that he was contributing to a private pension plan. He also intended to bring his son to the UK, but it depended on an agreement with his ex-wife.

In terms of life satisfaction, the interviewee expressed satisfaction with his financial situation and that given Covid, he did not think that the Romanian state would have or could have helped him more than the British state. He did express some regret at having left his extended family behind.

Table 8. A summary of the seventh interview

Theme	Stance
Family	Stable, but with small regrets for the relationship with the son left-behind
Community	Uninvolved, no ties to the community
Political Stance	Mainstream party preference

Commentary: The interviewee expressed regret at missing some of his son's most important life moments, though he did stay in touch with him on a regular basis. His family life was stable and he saw himself staying in the UK for the long-term. He did not declare being involved in the life of the community and expressed a preference towards mainstream political parties. The interviewee's stable family situation, coupled with his lack of involvement in community life indicate a preference for mainstream political parties.

Eighth interviewee, UK5

UK5(female, 44) had left Romania to the UK in 2015 together with her then husband because of their financial situation. She had never left the country before and they decided as a family that they would leave together to the UK

because they spoke English and thought that it would be an easier option. They intended to bring their children to the UK as well and live together but had since divorced and her two under-aged daughters stayed in Romania.

This interviewee's situation was different as compared to the others because she worked as a live-in carer for 6 to 4 weeks in a row and after she returned to Romania for 4 weeks. So she lived primarily between the two countries at the time of the interview. She stated that she kept in touch with her daughters very much, but that she noticed that they were very affected by this situation. Her elder daughter had started doing therapy and she stated that her youngest had also seemed impacted by their situation. The interviewee was also actively involved on school parents' groups and in her daughters' school activities, albeit online.

As a live-in carer the interviewee did not report a state of loneliness because she was constantly surrounded by people and she also stated that she tried to busy herself with different activities so that she would not feel alone.

The interviewee stated that she followed the news in Romania, but that she was not fully up-to-date with Romanian politics, but she wanted to be informed about certain things so that she would know whom to vote for. She deplored the state of the country stating that she thought that it was going from bad to worse and that people were just being used. She also did not think that the Romanian state was helping the diaspora in any way.

The interviewee did not declare a preference for a party or a politician, but said that she had voted in the Parliamentary elections with USR, as she tended to vote for the right, she also mentioned that she had wanted to cancel her vote, but that it was necessary to vote for someone at the end of the day.

Regarding her satisfaction with her life, the interviewee reported that she could not declare herself satisfied with her life as she could always have tried to do more for herself, but had failed at living a „normal life” that involved being married and living with her children and having some sort of stability, as opposed to living between countries.

When asked about her future plans she was unable to provide an answer as to whether she saw herself in the UK or in Romania in five years' time or

whether she intended to bring her daughters to the UK, despite her eldest daughter expressing the wish to study in the UK at university.

Table 9. A summary of the seventh interview

Theme	Stance
Family	Uncertainty, related to her permanent move between worlds, combined with the divorce
Community	Uninvolved, no ties to the community
Political stance	Disappointed, thinks the state does not do enough, votes with USR

Commentary: The interviewee was in an uncertain family situation, as she lived between countries Romania and the UK and could not state whether she would bring her daughters to the UK within the foreseeable future. She stated that her daughters were very affected by this situation, although she was in touch with them on a daily basis and was involved in long-distance care activities, such as maintaining the relationship with their school. She had not reported being involved in the community and stated that she had voted for USRPlus in the Parliamentary elections. The uncertain family life situation combined with a lack of involvement in the community lead to an anti-system party preference.

Ninth interviewee, DE4

DE4(female, 46) had a 16 year old son who lived in Romania at the time of the interview and she was divorced and got remarried in Germany. She had initially benefitted from a scholarship to Germany in 1999 in Munchen where she did part of her Master's Degree. With her former husband they had discussed the possibility of leaving the country and had considered the UK as both of them spoke English. She had however considered Germany because a relative of hers was based there and could help her settle. She left Romania for good in 2015 after losing her job in the banking sector. She had decided to leave on her own, because among other things she was

supporting her son who was active in professional dancing competitions which she stated were very costly. She met her current husband in Germany and decided to stay but kept a very good relationship with her former husband for the sake of her son who stayed behind in Romania. She did intend to bring her son to Germany, but his father did not agree to it.

The interviewee stated that she was very close to her son and that they were in touch several times a day. She expressed regret at not having fought to get custody of her son and that she intended to bring him to Germany for his university studies. Her son also visited her during the summer holidays and would spend six weeks in Germany together so they also spend time in person.

The interviewee stated that she read online press from Romania as she is concerned with the well-being of her parents and son, she was looking into where she could register them online for the Covid-19 vaccination. She followed Romanian politics but stated that Romania was going in the wrong direction and that she had been disappointed by the then President who had been elected in 2019. Though she did not express a preference for a politician she expressed a preference towards USR and PNL, having voted for both parties in the 2020 Parliamentary elections. She also stated that she had not noticed any particular interest from the Romanian State towards the diaspora, though it would be in the State's interest to stop losing its citizens to migration.

The interviewee declared that she saw herself in Germany in the following 5 years and that she identified herself with the German society and that she was quite satisfied with her life there, with her economic and personal status.

Commentary: The interviewee was in a stable family situation, albeit being remarried in Germany. She expressed regret at not having gained custody of her son, but did note that she was in close touch with him. She did not declare being part of the community and her preference was primarily towards USRPlus, as an anti-system party. In this case a stable family life, but no community involvement indicate an oscillation between mainstream and anti-system parties, though the interviewee expressed a slightly higher preference towards an anti-system party.

Table 10. A summary of the ninth interview

Theme	Stance
Family	Stable
Community	Uninvolved, no ties to the community
Political stance	Between anti-system and mainstream

Tenth interviewee, DE5

DE5 (female, 41). The interviewee had moved to Germany two years prior to the interview, she was remarried and had an 11 year old son in Romania. She had divorced her former husband and noted that women are not at all supported in Romania by the authorities during a divorce and she could not get full custody of her son. She left Romania with the intention of bringing her son to Germany, but it had not been possible up until the point of the interview. She had ended up in Germany because she had partnered with a man who had lived in Germany for a number of years and she moved to Germany to be with her partner.

The interviewee stated that during her first year in Germany she returned to Romania regularly, almost on a monthly basis, in order to be with her son and in the second year she started visiting him more rarely. She expressed great grief at not being with her son and had gone into therapy to deal with the separation. She was trying to be in touch with him on a daily basis, although her son would not always answer her calls.

The interviewee stated that she had a good life in Germany, she was happy with her work and despite the difficulty at the beginning of her migration experience, when she had not felt it was easy to make friends or acquaintances, though she did mention having her sister live only 80 km away from her, she could not easily integrate. She deplored the fact that she could not have her son with her.

The interviewee stated that she followed the news from Romania and that she felt very connected to the Romanian community, not only by virtue of

her job, which was that of consular role in Munich, she attended Romanian Church masses sometimes and had made Romanian friends. She followed Romanian politics and declared herself to be very disappointed with how Romania was doing, as she had always hoped that there would be a new opportunity to better, but did not see anything progress. She also did not think that the Romanian was focused on helping Romanian citizens abroad with sorting out their problems. The interviewee had voted in the 2020 elections for USR, despite not declaring a particular preference for a politician.

She stated that within 5 years' time she saw herself in Germany still and that she wishes she had achieved more in her life, despite being at the time satisfied with her economic status.

Table 11. A summary of the tenth interviewee's stances

Theme	Stance
Family	She has a new family, and a slowly fading relation with her left-behind son
Community	Well-involved, mainly with the local Romanian community
Political stance	Anti-system party preference

Commentary: The interviewee deplored the fact that she could not be with her son, despite keeping in touch with him on a daily basis. She is involved with the Romanian community in Germany and declared being very disappointed with how Romania was doing. She had voted for USR in the Parliamentary elections in 2020. In this case a stable family life combined with community involvement led to an anti-system party preference.

Discussion

Nevertheless, the ten considered cases, although enough to depict patterns, are not sufficient to explain how frequent such patterns are to be found in

the Romanian diaspora. Furthermore, we are limited to primarily a skilled sample of interviewees.

However, there was enough information to sketch these five patterns, that Table 12 further depicts.

Several patterns emerge from the interviews depicted above. The most prominent one is that transnational parents who find themselves in an uncertain situation regarding their family life, and who are uninvolved in the community life in their host country tend to have anti-system political options. This means that there is a positive correlation between the state of uncertainty of family life and the option to vote for anti-system parties. The interviewees who expressed these options also expressed disappointment at the state of Romanian politics in general. As the table illustrates, several interviewees fall into this pattern (DE2, DE3, UK5 and to a certain extent UK2). UK2 only partly belongs to this pattern as he oscillated between preferences for the former Prime-Minister Ponta (at the time part of the mainstream parties). All members of this cluster express disappointment with the state of Romanian politics and the Romanian state, while hoping that there would be a change.

There are also a few cases in which interviewees expressed a preference towards mainstream parties. They found themselves in stable family situations but were not necessarily involved in the community in their host countries. This pattern indicates that the stable family situation can contribute to a political stance that is favorable to mainstream parties. DE4 is somehow in between worlds in all possible ways. She remarried, keeps in good contact with her former husband but regrets not taking custody of her son, oscillates in voting between PNL and USR but manifests mainly anti-system resentment.

There were also a few situations in which a stable family situation and a situation of being involved with the community were also linked with anti-system political stances. This was especially the case where interviewees expressed disappointment with the political situation in Romania, despite not being sure whether they would be able to bring their children to the host country where they found themselves in. Despite their situation being stable

family-wise, their relationship with their children was uncertain when it came to the future.

These patterns represent ideal types, but we have classified the interviewees according to their dominant pattern, while notwithstanding that each interviewee can also belong to mixed patterns.

Table 12. Patterns

Pattern	Cases	Family	Community	Political stance
1	DE2, DE3 UK2* UK5	Painful relations, uncertain futures	Low integration or none	Disappointed with Romanian politics Accuses the state of own situation Anti-system preferences
2	DE1 UK4 DE4*	Stable relations	Involved with local Romanian communities Or Uninvolved	Mainstream parties
3	UK1, DE5	Stable relation, but children- related uncertainty	Involved with community	Anti-system preferences
4	UK2	Stable relation	Low integration, experiences loneliness	Anti-system preferences
5	UK3	Stable family relation	Uninvolved in community life	Anti-system preferences

To sum up, two types of stability seem to lead to mainstream party preference. One that derives from a stable family relation and involvement in the community in the host country and one that derives from a stable family relation but that is uninvolved in the community in the host country. This seems to indicate that family stability and support for mainstream parties are positively correlated.

When it comes to instability of family life, the cases point towards a positive correlation between family uncertainty, regret about leaving family members behind and a preference towards anti-system voting. In most cases the uncertainty of the family situation, doubled by the low integration with the community in the host country, or the lack of involvement with the community, points clearly towards anti-system preferences.

The outliers are two cases in which the family life was stable the interviewee was uninvolved in the community, but still expressed anti-system preferences. At least one other case is caught between the preference for a mainstream party and an anti-system party, but tended to express primarily anti-system resentment.

The patterns above indicate that we can talk about a certain fragility or predilection of transnational parents towards anti-system parties. While it cannot be clearly established that transnational parenthood alone determines such preferences, when combined with other elements, such as community involvement or integration, there is a clear link between the two. Moreover, it could be said that the lack of community involvement leads to a certain kind of alienation and potential reinforcement of feelings of guilt, regret and remorse at having left their child behind and thus lead to a clearer anti-system party preference.

It is worth noting that the interviewees were mainly skilled migrants and that the pattern of transnational parents who are skilled migrants tends to indicate a preference for anti-system parties. It is difficult to approximate what percentage of the skilled and highly-skilled migrant population abides by these patterns, but I suspect that the patterns can be found in at least a quarter of the population of skilled and highly skilled migrants who are transnational parents.

One interesting development is that the anti-system preferences have grown over the past years in Romania as well as in Western Europe, with increasing anti-immigrant sentiments adding to the degree of societal uncertainty already present. As the 2024 and 2025 presidential and parliamentary elections in Romania demonstrate the anti-system preference has only grown amongst the diaspora voters.

When looking at low skilled transnational parents' for example, we could anticipate a perhaps even higher level of anti-system political preference, as they are more exposed to anti-immigrant feeling, which also add to the uncertainty that they may already be experiencing in their host country.

On a societal level, given the interest in the increase in populist and anti-system political forces, it would be interesting to further explore the link between transnational parenthood and anti-system political preferences. This is doubled by the interest in Romania in the situation of children who are left behind by their parents who move abroad. The link between the space that can be exploited by anti-system parties and the uncertainty posed by transnational parenthood deserves further study.

There are some limitations to the strength of my findings. One is that the interviews were only held with the transnational parents and not the children or the other parent. However, seeing as my interest lies in transnational parenthood from the perspective of the transnational parent, this is not as big of an obstacle when taking into account the patterns that emerged in this study. One other drawback is that the interviewees were held shortly after or during the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning that uncertainties were compounded during that time period, but it is not likely that the findings were greatly affected by those circumstances. Yet another limitation relates to the pool of selection, while social media channels are accessible to migrants from all economic backgrounds, it was mostly highly educated migrants who accepted to participate in the study, a fact that may indicate they had more resources such as time, and perhaps a greater availability to participate in such a study. One further area of research could be in exploring more in-depth the motivations, circumstances and challenges faced by less educated migrants, who are likely to represent a different pool of interviewees.

What is interesting to note is that if in 2020 both USR and AUR ended up representing the anti-system vote, the 2024 Parliamentary shifted towards AUR as the main anti-system party.

Conclusion, limitations, implications

This book has had as its main purpose the exploration of the link between transnational parenthood and political stances, by looking at the situation of uncertainty that transnational parents, as migrants, find themselves in.

As posited in the conceptual model (chapter “General Conceptual Context”), **I have looked at transnational parents as more than parents or migrants, but also as political actors who have a say in the way in which politics takes place in their country of origin.** With the Romanian diaspora being one of the largest diasporas in the world, I have sought to identify what political stances transnational parents take both in terms of political preferences, as well as in terms of actual voting behaviour. I have covered the literature in the field of uncertainty, transnational parenthood and anti-system parties to build a case for the connection between the three elements.

The conclusions are summarized by three main findings:

1. Firstly, I looked at the literature on anti-system parties and identified the elements that make them appeal to voters. I explain why USR is an anti-system party and contextualize their success in the 2020 Parliamentary elections in Romania.
2. Secondly, I explored some of the literature around transnationalism and transnational parenthood to identify some of the themes that characterize transnational parenthood. I have shown that in specific instances, in particular of the less frequent interaction with the

family/children and lower sociability within the host society, transnational parenthood is associated with a higher degree of personal uncertainty. Such uncertainty exposes individuals to higher difficulties to cope with the uncertainty specific to so-called 'risk society'.

3. Thirdly, as a consequence, the link between migration and uncertainty strongly points in the direction of migrants undergoing primarily uncertain life and living situations. This is due to multiple factors, but is compounded in the case of transnational parents, who tend to experience uncertainty about their family life, more than other categories of migrants.

This book brings a new strand of research to the forefront of transnational parenthood, looking at parents beyond their immediate role in their families, as providers and carers, but also as political actors who not only have certain preferences, but who can also shape politics in their home countries via their voting behaviour. I thus held 10 in-depth interviews with Romanian transnational parents to identify how their circumstances contribute to shaping their political preferences and voting. Several patterns have emerged, which tend to indicate that transnational parents have anti-system political preferences and vote for anti-system parties. The identified patterns are ideal patterns, so there are also mixed patterns within them, which point towards some transnational parents having mainstream political preferences. The strongest identified pattern is that of parents who are affected by an uncertain family situation, who are uninvolved in community life and who tend to hold strong anti-system political preferences.

This work has several limitations, which must be accounted for.

Firstly, the selection of the interviewees indicates a bias towards skilled migrants, as they are the ones who presumably have easier access to social media channels and technology that allowed the respondents to participate in the interviews. There's also a time component to account for, with skilled migrants being arguably more inclined to offer their time for such studies.

Secondly, the Romanian diaspora tends to traditionally vote for anti-system parties and actors, as shown by the election results in the Presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, and as confirmed by the 2020 Parliamentary elections. This means that there was an implicit bias in the framing of the thesis, however my discoveries come to reinforce the overall pattern of voting, and what is more this was also confirmed by the massive vote for an anti-system candidate in the 2024 Presidential elections in Romania.

Thirdly, the patterns can only be expected to be generalizable across the skilled migrant category of Romanian transnational parents. Further and more in-depth studies would be needed to indicate the extent to which these patterns can be replicated across the unskilled Romanian migrant population.

Lastly, the interviews were held during and shortly after the Covid-19 pandemic and does not account for the exceptional situation that migrants found themselves in, depending on the national rules that were being enforced in Germany and the UK. However, it is not likely that the findings were affected to a large extent by these circumstances.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this work makes a contribution to the field of research that has so far focused on transnational parents mainly as carers and providers, rather than as migrants who also have political agency, and can shape political outcomes in their country of origin. I hope that this contribution can be further used to study patterns of political preferences and voting behaviour of transnational parents across different geographies.

One might wonder what is to be expected for future trends in the connection between transnational parenthood status and political preferences.

Whether instability and uncertainty continue to dominate society, with ongoing conflicts, economic crises and the rise of illiberal forces, transnational parenthood is likely to continue to be primarily linked with anti-system voting preferences and stances. The uncertainty that characterizes nowadays' society is likely to continue to be felt by transnational parents and shape their perception about the state of their own uncertainty relative to their family life and their life as migrants in the host

society. Conversely, should the overall state of societal uncertainty decline, I would expect transnational parents to also be impacted by such societal change and perhaps migrate towards more mainstream parties. Further studies are needed to explore the political preferences of transnational parents, with this work being a starting point in this area of study.

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