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*The Decline of Romania's Population after Communism:
The Impact of a Missing Generation*

ABSTRACT: *Romania, a country in eastern Europe, is known to many only as the home of the legendary Transylvanian Count Dracula. This essay examines the emigration of Romanians during the post-communist era since 1989 and the repercussions of their absence. It considers why adult Romanians leave the country and how this impacts their children as well as the elderly left behind. The author argues that, while life abroad may be attractive to Romanians for economic reasons, it leaves their relatives back home in a dire situation.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Romania; Bulgaria; European Union (E.U.); United Kingdom (U.K.); migration; demographics; documentaries; news media; Eurovision Song Contest*

Introduction

Since 1989 – the end of the communist era in its history – Romania has been losing its working-age population to the West at a steady pace, and with no end in sight to this exodus, the country is headed toward a large-scale domestic crisis. Romania shares a border with Moldova, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary; it was a member of the Soviet Bloc until its revolution in 1989; and it has since been transformed into a semi-democratic country that is slowly being integrated into the West.¹ Romania's steady loss of its working-age population is a direct result of its dire economic situation, which has caused many Romanians to lose hope for a personal future in their home country. If nothing is done to counter this development, Romania will lose roughly twenty-five percent of its population by 2050.² This essay examines the repercussions of Romanian emigration. It argues that, while living life abroad may be attractive to Romanians primarily for economic reasons, it leaves their relatives back home in dire straits by causing trauma for the children and unexpected burdens for the elderly.

While this is a subject matter of considerable historical relevance, the fact that it is relatively recent and still ongoing means that there are no readily available archival fonts or extensive English editions of primary sources yet, which is why the evidence used here derives from video documentaries, news stories, and, in one instance, a song. Video documentaries cover a wide range of topics, but their main benefit is that they feature footage from interviews with individuals who offer their personal perspectives; that said, individuals interviewed live on camera also tend to limit what they say to protect their own image. The value of news stories is that they often provide useful contextual information and, not unlike video documentaries, the testimonials of individuals closely involved in the

¹ Lucian Boia, *Romania: Borderland of Europe* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2001), 148-151. Boia argues that the elite of the communist era simply transitioned into the post-communist era and retained power. While the dictator was killed in 1989, everything else remained the same.

² Ilinca Păun Constantinescu, "Shrinking Cities in Romania: Former Mining Cities in Valea Jiului," *Built Environment* 38, no. 2 (2012): 214-228, here 216.

reporting; the main source-critical caveat with regard to news stories is that they frequently pursue a specific angle and are liable to omit evidence that does not pertain to that angle. The song discussed below, “De la Capăt” (“From the Beginning”) by the band Voltaj, draws attention to the millions of Romanian children abandoned by parents who seek prosperity elsewhere – ostensibly to be able to take better care of their children; what makes this song evidence is the fact that the combined votes of a jury and television audiences in Romania determined that this song would represent their country in the 2015 Eurovision Song Contest.

The steady departure of Romania’s working-age population for the West since 1989, as well as its respective repercussions back home, are increasingly attracting scholarly attention. For example, in 2008, Tom Gallagher’s monograph, *Modern Romania: The End of Communism, the Failure of Democratic Reform, and the Theft of a Nation*, pointed to the rampant inequality in the country;³ in 2012, Ilinca Păun Constantinescu published an article on related economic, environmental, and urban issues;⁴ in 2014, Charles A. Nelson, Nathan A. Fox, and Charles H. Zeanah employed psychological and sociological methodologies in their groundbreaking study, *Romania’s Abandoned Children: Deprivation, Brain Development, and the Struggle for Recovery*;⁵ and in 2020, Vasile Gherheș, Gabriel-Mugurel Dragomir, and Mariana Cernicova-Buca discussed the “migration intentions of Romanian engineering students.”⁶ Taking its cues from these and other publications, this essay first considers why adult Romanians leave the country; secondly, how this impacts their children; and thirdly, how it affects the elderly who are left behind, often in places with limited infrastructure.

I. Why Leave Romania?

Leaving one’s homeland and roots is rarely an easy choice, but it is seen as a necessary stage in life by many Romanians. This section explores their motives for emigration, their experiences abroad, and the potentially positive impacts of the latter. Those leaving must believe that it is rational and better for them to emigrate instead of staying in Romania. Yet, while living life abroad might indeed be beneficial for some individuals and even some Romanian communities, the overarching concern is the impact of emigration on those left behind.

To better understand why working-age adults leave Romania, consider the example of Carolina Muraru, a fifty-year-old veterinarian who lives in a village in

³ Tom Gallagher, *Modern Romania: The End of Communism, the Failure of Democratic Reform, and the Theft of a Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

⁴ Constantinescu, “Shrinking Cities.”

⁵ Charles A. Nelson, Nathan A. Fox, and Charles H. Zeanah, *Romania’s Abandoned Children: Deprivation, Brain Development, and the Struggle for Recovery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁶ Vasile Gherheș, Gabriel-Mugurel Dragomir, and Mariana Cernicova-Buca, “Migration Intentions of Romanian Engineering Students,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 4846 (2020): 1-31.

the country's northeastern region.⁷ Without mentioning a specific country, Mrs. Muraru relates that she lived abroad for an undisclosed period of time,⁸ stating that she did so "for money."⁹ When asked why she thinks other people are leaving Romania, she answers, "for a better life," and then emotionally adds that "it is Romania that is pushing us away. Bad salary, no studies."¹⁰ In her opinion, the future of Romania is grim; she fears that, soon, "all the youth will be gone. I am worried about the future of my child. No work, no money. We have a beautiful country, but the youth need a future."¹¹ From Mrs. Muraru's perspective, something is not working in Romania. Without divulging too many details, she informs us that she only returned to Romania because of family problems,¹² suggesting that, if it were up to her, she would still be working abroad. She paints a picture in which the youth have no option but to leave their homes. Romania is not providing for its citizens, and that falls on the Romanian government: according to Mrs. Muraru, one cannot even use education to pull oneself up the social ladder.¹³ Her prediction concerning Romania's future is disconcerting, as she fears that all the young people will leave. She appears convinced that this trend could be reversed through better wages, better jobs, and a better education system. Economic factors were her primary motivation for leaving the country, and many Romanians list economic factors as their motivation for emigrating as well.

Scholars have taken notice of the various issues brought up in Mrs. Muraru's interview, including migration for economic reasons and the country's respective rural-urban divide. After the fall of communism in 1989, Romania switched to a capitalist market system where everything was privatized, meaning that industrial centers that were not profitable were simply closed.¹⁴ Due to these closures, people in many rural areas and smaller towns lost their opportunity to earn good wages, and poverty became rampant there; combined with the overall lack of social mobility, this caused many Romanians to emigrate.¹⁵ Indeed, the rural parts of Romania were more heavily affected by the post-communist economic downturn. Since job opportunities were increasingly limited to the country's main cities, an internal migration brought more and more people to the cities, leaving the rural areas to their own devices.¹⁶ Mrs. Muraru's interview was recorded in a small

⁷ Joris Slotboom, "Documentary: Migration in North-East Romania," March 19, 2019, *YouTube, online*, accessed June 18, 2022. Carolina Muraru's interview starts at 00:36:54.

⁸ Slotboom, "Documentary."

⁹ Slotboom, "Documentary."

¹⁰ Slotboom, "Documentary."

¹¹ Slotboom, "Documentary."

¹² Slotboom, "Documentary."

¹³ Slotboom, "Documentary."

¹⁴ Constantinescu, "Shrinking Cities," 219-220.

¹⁵ Constantinescu, "Shrinking Cities," 220.

¹⁶ Constantinescu, "Shrinking Cities," 217.

village, a farm setting,¹⁷ and she indicates that Romania's rural areas have been left behind. Constantinescu's scholarship confirms this observation:¹⁸ Romanians are following the money – just as Mrs. Muraru had done – from the countryside to the cities, and from there in increasing numbers to job opportunities abroad.

To get a sense of what awaits Romanians abroad, we turn to Victor Spirescu, a young Romanian construction worker employed in southwestern London in the United Kingdom (U.K.).¹⁹ After Romania had joined the European Union (E.U.) in 2007, Romanians eventually became eligible to work in other E.U. member states.²⁰ On January 1, 2014 (a year and a half before the Brexit referendum), Mr. Spirescu arrived in the United Kingdom, and he soon had a stable job with a steady wage.²¹ He tells us, "When I came, I wanted to stay only three or four months, but now, I have my own company, I have my own job, you know, and, why – I don't have any reason to go ... home."²² According to Mr. Spirescu, only those who work hard reap the benefits of staying abroad, while those who seek to abuse the system by relying on government assistance accomplish nothing.²³ Mr. Spirescu indicates that he is now living the kind of life he did not have in Romania, and he is adamant that there is no reason for him to go back. We do not learn whether he still has a family back in Romania or any other connections, but he even seems to hesitate when referring to Romania as "home." His statements suggest that he, too, had left Romania for economic reasons, and his willingness to work hard has clearly been rewarded.

Mr. Spirescu's interview underscores that he views himself as better off in the United Kingdom. The logic is the same for scores of others. Doctors and nurses in Romania are grossly underpaid and often neglected, so a majority of them are leaving Romania to settle in other E.U. countries that appreciate and pay a living wage for their work.²⁴ Another example with more finite data pertains to Romania's engineering students who, in 2019/2020, were asked about their intentions to leave the country after graduation.²⁵ Of the 1,782 students interviewed, between 20% and 30% said they would leave, around 30% said they

¹⁷ Slotboom, "Documentary."

¹⁸ Constantinescu, "Shrinking Cities," 224.

¹⁹ ITV News, "Romanian Migrant: 'I Don't Have Any Reason to Go Home'," August 28, 2015, *YouTube*, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

²⁰ Tom Gallagher, *Romania and the European Union: How the Weak Vanquished the Strong* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 262.

²¹ ITV News, "Romanian Migrant."

²² ITV News, "Romanian Migrant."

²³ ITV News, "Romanian Migrant."

²⁴ Ginger Hervey, "The EU Exodus: When Doctors and Nurses Follow the Money," *Politico*, September 30, 2017, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

²⁵ Gherheș, Dragomir, and Cernicova-Buca, "Migration Intentions," 1-31.

would not, and about 50% said they were undecided.²⁶ Of those who responded that they would be leaving, approximately 60% said it was because of low wages in Romania and a lack of money.²⁷ These students, like Carolina Muraru and Victor Spirescu before them, look abroad for a chance to better their economic situation. In Romania itself, inequality remains high, and scholars point out that this inequality drives working-age adults out of the country.²⁸ Romania's Gini coefficient of 35 makes it the country with the highest level of economic inequality in central and eastern Europe.²⁹ Inequality, lack of opportunity, and low salaries literally push Romanians, who are ready to work, to go abroad.

Money earned by Romanians abroad sometimes does help communities back home. For example, by 2014, about 1,000 adults from a small region in northwestern Transylvania were working in the United Kingdom and sending money home to rebuild their villages.³⁰ According to one of them, Andrey Pavlovic, a young Romanian worker in a London glazing firm who was back home for the holidays, "Over here [i.e., in Romania] in a month you can get about, maybe, 300 pounds a month, but in England, you can get this money in two or three days."³¹ Maria Nестea, another worker back in Romania for the holidays, relates that all her adult family members are also working abroad.³² Explaining why she left Romania, she says, "There is a chance to win some money for our families because here it is very hard to win the money for life."³³ Throughout this news segment, we see big houses that are being built in these villages from money earned abroad.³⁴ The fact that about 1,000 adults from this small region alone are working abroad seems to suggest that there is a certain amount of pressure—an expectation even—to go abroad and make money. While, once again, economic factors loom large, in this case, the workers spend time abroad and earn a good living, but they then send some of their earnings back home and, during the holidays, return to Transylvania to help rebuild their villages. Thus, their connection to their communities is strong, and their impact on their communities is positive. While they are temporarily absent from their villages and clearly being missed, the interviews strongly suggest that they plan to return eventually. They have not abandoned Romania.

²⁶ Gherheș, Dragomir, and Cernicova-Buca, "Migration Intentions," 10.

²⁷ Gherheș, Dragomir, and Cernicova-Buca, "Migration Intentions," 7.

²⁸ Andrei-Florin Crețu, "Income Inequality in Romania: A Comprehensive Assessment," October 23, 2016, paper, 3, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

²⁹ Crețu, "Income Inequality," 3-5.

³⁰ ITV News, "Romanian Communities Transformed by Money Earned in the U.K.," February 10, 2014, *YouTube*, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

³¹ ITV News, "Romanian Communities."

³² ITV News, "Romanian Communities."

³³ ITV News, "Romanian Communities."

³⁴ ITV News, "Romanian Communities."

These examples show that earning money is the key motivation that drives Romanians abroad. The lack of opportunity, especially in the country's rural and more remote areas, rather forces people to leave,³⁵ and most of those emigrating are not expected to return.³⁶ Yet, the example from Transylvania indicates that there are exceptions to this rule. Essentially, those going abroad are seeking a better life—either “just” for themselves, in which case they often emigrate permanently, or for their entire communities, in which case they have every intention of returning. Until Romania can offer its citizens the opportunity to improve their lives at home, the country's working-age adults will continue—and will have to continue—to go abroad.

II. A Future Abandoned: Children Left Behind

As we have discovered, many Romanians emigrate to work abroad, meaning they leave everything behind—including their children. The children do not get an option or a say in the matter; they are simply left in their home country. Sometimes they are taken in by relatives, other times they are just abandoned. In 2018, there were over 96,000 children who had officially been placed into the legal custody of relatives.³⁷ While that number is high, it is believed that the real number is considerably higher.³⁸ Not having parents is sure to impact a child, so this section focuses on those of Romania's children who have been left behind.

Romanians know that this is an issue, and they have been trying to tackle the problem. They do so by raising awareness of the issue and by urging parents to not abandon their children. One example of this is the Romanian entry for the 2015 Eurovision Song Contest, “De la Capăt” (“From the Beginning”) by the band Voltaj.³⁹ The combined votes of a jury and television audiences in Romania determined that this song would represent their country in this international music competition. “De la Capăt” tells the story of a Romanian child left behind by his parents while they work abroad. In the beginning, the child is writing a letter to his parents in which he asks, “Why don't you come?” As the song continues, the child loses contact with his parents, and he finally ventures out to find them himself.⁴⁰ In their video of the song, the band included a slide of text, highlighting that over three million Romanians work abroad and that their children are left behind.⁴¹ In the contest, Romania placed 15th out of 27 countries.

³⁵ Constantinescu, “Shrinking Cities,” 217-218.

³⁶ Constantinescu, “Shrinking Cities,” 219.

³⁷ TRT World, “Romania Emigration: Population in Decline as Citizens Move for Work,” April 7, 2018, *YouTube*, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

³⁸ TRT World, “Romania Emigration.” Researchers have tried to establish the number of children left behind by their parents, but there are no reliable numbers.

³⁹ Cat Music and Voltz Media, “Voltaj—De La Capat (Official Video),” December 1, 2014, *YouTube*, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022

⁴⁰ Cat Music and Voltz Media, “Voltaj—De La Capat.”

⁴¹ Cat Music and Voltz Media, “Voltaj—De La Capat.”

“De la Capăt” certainly revived awareness of the issue in Romania, but it also garnered a lot of interest and support all over Europe. Thus, the song really served two purposes: first of all, it highlighted the issue itself and educated other Europeans that Romanians working abroad, including those in their respective countries, often felt compelled to leave their children back home due to adverse economic circumstances; secondly, the song put pressure on Romanian parents not to leave their children. Considering Europe’s long history with international guest workers, it should not be automatically assumed that all parents were fully cognizant of the harm they might do to their children by leaving them, but the child’s struggle in “De la Capăt” resonated with many.

Scholars agree that, when a parent leaves a child, that child is more prone to mental health problems.⁴² The respective trauma derives from a lack of close feelings with loved ones, and it can hinder a child’s ability to develop and show emotions appropriately.⁴³ While this goes beyond the immediate message of “De la Capăt,” it is a reality for many children left behind in Romania. The main trigger seems to be the lack of belonging to a close-knit (family) unit and the lack of love.⁴⁴ Leaving children with relatives or close friends, who are dedicated to raising them in a loving home, can alleviate this to a certain extent.

In recent years, there has been a movement in Romania to close state-run orphanages and place the respective children in foster homes.⁴⁵ The logic behind this is a consensus that children should grow up in homes where they can feel love and get a sense that they belong.⁴⁶ During the communist era, Romania’s state-run orphanages had a dark history as horrific places of neglect, detrimental to children’s mental and physical health.⁴⁷ While they improved post-1989, their negative reputation lingers, and some of the children placed in these orphanages are the ones left behind by parents working abroad. Yet these are not the only circumstances that can lead to orphanage placement, as the example of the five Minole sisters shows, who were eventually adopted by their aunt and uncle.

In a documentary, one of the teenage sisters recounts how they ended up in an orphanage: “My mother left home many years ago. We were left with our father, who was killed. We were underage, and we had to go to the institution. We were taken by the child protection agency.”⁴⁸ In her account, one thing stands out: it appears that their mother completely abandoned them, including their father. The documentary does not reveal whether the girls knew why their mother had left,

⁴² Nelson, Fox, and Zeanah, *Romania's Abandoned Children*, 152-154.

⁴³ Nelson, Fox, and Zeanah, *Romania's Abandoned Children*, 154.

⁴⁴ Nelson, Fox, and Zeanah, *Romania's Abandoned Children*, 155-156.

⁴⁵ “Romania’s Last Orphanages,” *The Economist*, August 7, 2018, *YouTube*, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

⁴⁶ Nelson, Fox, and Zeanah, *Romania's Abandoned Children*, 155-156.

⁴⁷ “Romania’s Last Orphanages,” *The Economist*.

⁴⁸ “Romania’s Last Orphanages,” *The Economist*.

nor where she had gone, but theirs is an example of a parent leaving and not being involved in the children's lives. When they lost their father, too, apparently due to some kind of tragedy, they were put under state protection. Luckily, their aunt and uncle stepped up and obtained custody of all five girls, explaining that they did so because they wanted the girls to grow up in a loving environment.⁴⁹ Romania's movement to close the orphanages and the actions of the Minole sisters' relatives show that there is an acknowledgment of the negative impact when children are left alone and raised without a loving environment. Romanians do try to ensure that all the children left behind are cared for and raised in the best possible conditions.⁵⁰ Yet, the mental impact on children who are forced to grow up without their parents is significant, and sometimes, when these children grow older, they find themselves trapped in challenging situations due to their parents' earlier actions. As the following case demonstrates, some children are left to carry their parents' burden.

Ioana Bujor, a young woman from a city in northeastern Romania, is an example of how trauma and unexpected responsibility can affect a young person left without a parent.⁵¹ According to Ms. Bujor, her father had left her and her mother in order to work abroad when she was seven years old.⁵² She states that she understood the reason why her father had left them, but she felt indifferent because the economic rationale did not change the fact that her father had left them.⁵³ What is more, after he had left, she felt that she had to take care of and stay close to her mother.⁵⁴ As a result, she did not want to have anything to do with her father, even though he was calling her on the phone from Sweden. Two things stand out from Ms. Bujor's interview; first, she experienced trauma when her father left her; and second, she seems to feel trapped in Romania. Children left at a young age often experience some form of trauma.⁵⁵ While Ms. Bujor does not seem to consider her mother as a burden, she appears to resent the sentiment of not feeling at liberty to leave Romania as her father had done. Scholars would argue that Ms. Bujor is suffering from a childhood trauma.⁵⁶ Someone was unexpectedly placed into her care, making it hard for her to leave, which, in turn, made her resent the person who had left them in this position. Thus, her trauma impacts her relationship with her father. Extrapolating from this case, it is fair to assume that trauma plays a big part in the lives of young Romanians whose parents have left them back home to pursue economic opportunities abroad.

⁴⁹ "Romania's Last Orphanages," *The Economist*.

⁵⁰ Nelson, Fox, and Zeanah, *Romania's Abandoned Children*, 159.

⁵¹ Slotboom, "Documentary." The interview segments with Ioana Bujor begin at 00:05:58.

⁵² Slotboom, "Documentary."

⁵³ Slotboom, "Documentary."

⁵⁴ Slotboom, "Documentary."

⁵⁵ Nelson, Fox, and Zeanah, *Romania's Abandoned Children*, 159.

⁵⁶ Nelson, Fox, and Zeanah, *Romania's Abandoned Children*, 158-160.

Romanian children left behind by their parents suffer considerably, and their number is not small. As we have seen at the beginning of this section, in 2018, around 96,000 children had officially been placed into the legal custody of their relatives. As emigration accelerates, this official number is bound to grow – to say nothing of the many children not included in such official statistics because they have simply been left to their own devices. Romanian society is taking some steps to alleviate the situation by making sure that orphaned and left-behind children get the chance to grow up with some love and care in foster families, but the root of the problem still exists. It is up to parents who leave the country to consider the well-being of their children. It is up to them to make sure their children are taken care of. Parents who go abroad for better wages cannot simply ignore their children. The full impact of all this on the generations of Romanian children who are forced to grow up without their parents has yet to be revealed, as journalists and scholars gather the ever-mounting evidence.

III. Carrying the Burden: Romania's Elderly

When Romania's working-age adults emigrate, they do not just leave the youth – they also leave the elderly. This section sets out to demonstrate that the elderly are the carriers of the burden in Romania. They often find themselves taking care of the children that have been left by their parents, and they have to make life work in villages where most able-bodied adults are gone. Thus, they pay a heavy price for the country's population decline that is caused by emigration.

To illustrate this, we turn to the example of an elderly grandmother who is taking care of one of her grandchildren. Mrs. Paraschiva Dihore is the legal guardian of her teenage grandson. She claims that his parents are significantly involved in his upbringing, and she brushes off any praise that is coming to her for raising the teenager while his parents are gone.⁵⁷ Mrs. Dihore states that her grandson is a good young man and that he is doing well, overall, with his parents not being there.⁵⁸ While she credits her grandson's parents a lot, it is she who is actually raising the young man and being there with him. It is clear that Mrs. Dihore has contact with her children and in-laws, including the parents of her teenage grandson. It can only be assumed that they help her financially, but she bears the responsibility of raising the teenager alone. Throughout her whole interview, she remains upbeat and proud of how well the young man is doing, but she probably realizes that he, too, will have to go abroad one day. As Dumitru Sandu, a professor at the University of Bucharest, states, "Romania is a poor and disorganized country. Romanian migration is economic migration. But it's becoming more and more a social issue. Doctors, for instance, leave because they don't have adequate working conditions."⁵⁹ Sandu's statement, once again,

⁵⁷ TRT World, "Romania Emigration."

⁵⁸ TRT World, "Romania Emigration."

⁵⁹ TRT World, "Romania Emigration." The interview with Dumitru Sandu begins at 00:00:59.

underscores the dire economic conditions that drive people out, but he also seems to blame the government for the country's poor work environment.

While some Romanians abandon their children, the same happens to some of the elderly. As Ioana Bujor mentions in her interview, she has plenty of friends her age (i.e., in their twenties) who simply leave their elderly parents without any support.⁶⁰ While she chose to stay in her town to take care of her mother, others did not feel the same way. In one of the documentaries, an unnamed Romanian shopkeeper points to another aspect of this:

All the youth are moving to the city or to another country to work and the people in the village are very old. Nobody is taking care of things. We belong to nobody. We are far away from the city, and we are isolated. In twelve years, there was 280 who died and only 6 were born. The whole commune consists of 13 villages, and from all the villages there are only 15 kids in the classroom. Back in the day when I was little, there were like 60 children in one classroom.⁶¹

While Ms. Bujor's interview suggests that disregard for the elderly is a general problem in the country, the unnamed shopkeeper's statement indicates that it hits those in the countryside, the elderly villagers, particularly hard. He seems to call out the younger generation for simply leaving, but he also blames the government when he asserts, "Nobody is taking care of things." With many of Romania's elderly left behind, the people expect the government to provide for them and, in the long run, facilitate the kind of economic opportunities and work environment that would entice the younger generations to stay in the country, including its villages and more remote areas. However, as scholars point out, Romania's government is wrought with corruption and incompetence.⁶² So, Romanians feel like their government is failing them; some would even argue that real democratic reforms have yet to occur in the country,⁶³ an assessment shared by scholars.⁶⁴

Our final example for the plight of the elderly does not come from Romania itself but, rather, from its southern neighbor—Bulgaria. A documentary focusing on and filmed around the village of Altimir (which is in northwestern Bulgaria and just across the border with Romania), follows Yordan, an elderly villager who lives with his wife and two grandchildren.⁶⁵ Yordan talks about how lonely Altimir has become since most of its working-age people have left to work abroad.⁶⁶ He fears that the village will disappear because no one will live there

⁶⁰ Slotboom, "Documentary."

⁶¹ Slotboom, "Documentary." The interview with this unnamed man begins at 00:38:27. While he talks to the camera, one can see two elderly people in his store; while they are not addressed directly, they seem to agree with what this unnamed man is saying.

⁶² Gallagher, *Modern Romania*, 300-302.

⁶³ Gallagher, *Modern Romania*, 305.

⁶⁴ Gallagher, *Modern Romania*, 302-303.

⁶⁵ Kay Hannahan, "Bulgaria: The World's Fastest-Shrinking Country," *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2019, *YouTube*, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

⁶⁶ Hannahan, "Bulgaria."

once he and his elderly friends will have passed away.⁶⁷ Throughout the interview, Yordan shows the camera crew around the village on his bicycle, and he even points out the old factories that once provided jobs but have long since closed.⁶⁸ Yordan speaks about his life and their struggles, and—through his interview—documents and preserves Altimir's history,⁶⁹ thus leaving a legacy for future generations, including his grandchildren.

While this documentary pertains to Bulgaria, the same is happening in Romania. In fact, entire villages are becoming depopulated throughout eastern Europe due to a lack of opportunities, infrastructure, and overall quality of life.⁷⁰ Villages in remote rural areas are most affected by this trend, and unless there is a significant economic revival, they will continue to decline and eventually disappear.⁷¹ Thus, Yordan's Altimir may no longer be around in the future, and the documentary featuring his memories may well turn out to be one of the few things reminding Bulgarians of its existence.

The elderly are Romania's unsung heroes. They carry the burden when the younger, working-age adults leave to go abroad, particularly by watching over the thousands of children left behind by their parents. Throughout Romania, the elderly do their best to make life work alongside their remaining friends and family. They are the ones currently keeping the country moving forward, albeit at an incremental pace, and without them, even more issues would arise.

Conclusion

An examination of Romania's post-1989 generations—the youth, the working-age adults, and the elderly—reveals that, while there are certain advantages to the emigration of working-age Romanians to other European countries for the purpose of finding well-paying jobs (as evidenced by the money that is being sent back to family members back home), the adverse effects on the youth and the elderly are considerable: both groups suffer immensely, whether it is in the form of trauma for the children that leads to developmental and mental-health issues, or in the form of abandonment of the elderly without resources.

The issues addressed in this essay leave ample opportunity for future research, particularly since pertinent scholarly work in English is still limited. It would be worthwhile to gather both quantitative and qualitative evidence systematically from across Romania—the countryside, villages, small towns, and larger cities—to better assess the impact of the country's missing generation. While quantitative data could be gathered from government agencies, economic organizations, and

⁶⁷ Hannahan, "Bulgaria."

⁶⁸ Hannahan, "Bulgaria."

⁶⁹ Hannahan, "Bulgaria."

⁷⁰ Constantinescu, "Shrinking Cities," 223-226.

⁷¹ Constantinescu, "Shrinking Cities," 219-220.

perhaps charitable, cultural, and educational institutions, qualitative data could be obtained by means of an extensive oral-history project.

While some may feel inclined to blame Romania's working-age adults for emigrating and thereby harming the country's youth and elderly, that would be unfair, because their personal economic circumstances and the country's overall economic situation all but force them to leave. The future of the Romanian nation is in jeopardy, and decisive action is needed. It appears that it is now up to Romania's elected officials to provide the kind of leadership that will, over time, facilitate improvement at home.

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