Theoretical and Applied Economics
Volume XXXIII (2026), No. 1(646), Spring, pp. 295-308

Internal vs external migration: comparative patterns within the EU

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Abstract. *Migration is a structurally important factor influencing demographic and economic changes within the EU. This paper explores migration patterns between six EU countries: Germany, Spain, France, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania, over the period 2012-2023. The research employs both descriptive analysis and a two-way fixed effects estimation. Findings reveal a persistent core-periphery asymmetry between the West and the East, especially Romania. Results show that high levels of unemployment reduce the net migration balance, but short-run variations in GDP per capita have no impact. The change in the Romanian migration balance to positive after 2022 points to a new, higher circulation regime.*

Keywords: Migration dynamics, Core–periphery asymmetry, Labour mobility, Fixed-effects panel model, Romania net migration.

JEL Classification: F22, J61, R23.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, migration has become one of the central forces reshaping the demographic and economic landscape of the European Union (EU). What was once predominantly framed as a mechanism facilitating labour market adjustment has gradually evolved into a structurally transformative phenomenon affecting population size, age composition, regional convergence, and political cohesion. The combined pressures of population ageing, labour shortages, economic divergence, and successive geopolitical crises have placed migration at the intersection of demographic sustainability and governance reform.

Within the EU, free movement has enabled significant intra-European labour mobility, particularly from Eastern and Southern member states toward Western economies. While this mobility has supported economic convergence and helped address labour demand in receiving countries, its demographic implications are more complex. Potančoková, Stonawski, and Gailey (2021) demonstrate that migration substantially influences the size and educational composition of working-age populations across EU macro-regions. Their projections show that although migration can partially slow population decline, it is insufficient to reverse structural ageing trends, especially in Eastern and Southern Europe. Consequently, migration does not merely redistribute labour; it reshapes the long-term demographic equilibrium of entire regions.

At the same time, the governance of migration at the EU level has undergone profound transformation. The 2015–2016 refugee crisis marked a critical turning point, accelerating the development of the external dimension of EU migration policy. Since then, externalisation strategies, strengthened border management, readmission agreements, and cooperation with third countries have become central instruments of migration governance. This shift reflects a broader trend toward securitisation and the projection of migration management beyond EU territorial borders. Rather than functioning solely as an internal mobility system, the EU increasingly operates as a complex governance space balancing free movement with restrictive external controls.

Recent analyses suggest that this governance architecture remains marked by tension and fragmentation. Bisson and Potemkina (2023) highlight persistent solidarity deficits among member states, reform deadlocks within the Common European Asylum System, and the politicisation of responsibility-sharing mechanisms. Despite institutional reform efforts, coordination challenges continue to shape EU-level responses, reinforcing the perception of migration as both a structural necessity and a politically sensitive domain.

These governance developments intersect directly with internal labour mobility patterns. Eastern member states occupy a structurally distinct position within the EU migration system, functioning predominantly as net sending countries. Potančoková et al. (2021) show that Eastern Europe has acted as a demographic contributor to Western macro-regions through sustained outflows of working-age individuals. While this redistribution supports economic dynamism in receiving states, it intensifies demographic contraction and labour shortages in sending countries. Internal mobility and external migration governance therefore cannot be treated as separate analytical domains; they are interdependent

components of a broader European migration system characterised by asymmetric demographic and economic effects.

Romania represents a particularly illustrative case within this structural configuration. Over the past decade, it has recorded one of the highest emigration rates in the EU. Ivan, Prelipcean, and Lupan (2025) argue that sustained emigration has contributed to labour market imbalances, accelerated demographic decline, and increased reliance on diaspora communities. At the policy level, Romania's migration framework has remained primarily oriented toward immigration management rather than toward a comprehensive strategy integrating emigration, return migration, and diaspora engagement. Compared with other EU member states that have developed long-term demographic and diaspora strategies, Romania's approach appears more fragmented and reactive than structurally coordinated.

At the macro-regional level, the EU migration system exhibits characteristics of a core–periphery structure. Western member states function predominantly as net receivers, while Eastern member states remain net senders. This asymmetry has implications that extend beyond demographic redistribution; it reinforces divergence risks, labour market imbalances, and governance tensions across the Union. External migration policies designed to regulate inflows from outside the EU operate within this already uneven internal mobility framework, adding another layer of complexity to policy coordination.

Despite the growing body of literature on demographic projections, EU migration governance, and national migration strategies, several analytical gaps remain. First, demographic outcomes and governance transformations are frequently examined in isolation, limiting our understanding of how internal labour mobility and external migration control interact within a unified system. Second, relatively limited research systematically positions Eastern sending states within both macro-regional demographic restructuring and EU-level governance evolution. Third, the interaction between economic fundamentals, demographic change, and governance fragmentation remains underexplored in longitudinal comparative perspective.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a comparative analysis of migration patterns across selected EU member states between 2012 and 2023, with particular emphasis on Romania. By integrating macro-regional demographic evidence with developments in EU migration governance, the paper examines how economic fundamentals and institutional frameworks jointly shape net migration balances. Situating Romania within the broader European migration system allows for a more nuanced understanding of migration as simultaneously a demographic restructuring force, an economic adjustment mechanism, and a politically contested governance domain.

Literature Review: Migration, Demographic Change, and Governance in the European Union

Migration within the European Union has been interpreted through multiple theoretical traditions that only partially overlap. The neoclassical framework, associated with Harris and Todaro and later formalised in migration economics by George Borjas, conceptualises migration as a rational response to wage differentials and employment probabilities. In

integrated markets, labour is expected to move from lower-productivity to higher-productivity regions, contributing to convergence. Within the EU, this model appears empirically relevant: European Commission analyses of intra-EU labour mobility consistently show that unemployment differentials and income gaps correlate with cross-border movement, while econometric work such as Kozlovskyi (2024) confirms statistically significant relationships between macroeconomic performance and net migration balances.

Yet purely neoclassical explanations have long been considered insufficient. Piore's dual labour market theory argues that migration is structurally embedded in segmented labour demand within advanced economies, where certain sectors rely persistently on flexible and lower-cost labour. This helps explain why countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain continue to attract both intra-EU and third-country workers even during cyclical downturns. Hatton and Williamson's historical analyses of migration waves further demonstrate that structural labour demand and demographic pressures jointly shape long-term mobility patterns rather than short-term wage signals alone.

Network theory and cumulative causation models, most prominently developed by Massey and colleagues, add another layer by showing how migration becomes self-reinforcing over time. Established diaspora communities reduce information and transition costs, generating stable corridors that persist beyond immediate economic fluctuations. This mechanism is visible in the Romanian case: European Commission mobility reports repeatedly identify Italy and Germany as dominant destinations, while Eurostat data confirm that Romanian citizens constitute the largest group of EU nationals residing in another member state, exceeding three million individuals. Such concentration is not easily explained by short-term macroeconomic variables alone; it reflects embedded social and institutional linkages.

World-systems and core–periphery perspectives, drawing on Wallerstein and later adapted by Castles and Miller in The Age of Migration, situate EU mobility within broader uneven development structures. From this vantage point, East–West labour flows following enlargement represent not transitional adjustment, but a structural redistribution of labour within a hierarchically integrated regional economy. Favell's work on Eurostars and free movers similarly highlights how European integration created differentiated mobility regimes that privilege certain skill groups and trajectories. Török's spatial analysis of post-accession mobility further reinforces the view that sending and receiving regions form durable, asymmetrical nodes within a European migration system.

Demographic scholarship deepens this structural interpretation. Potančoková, Stonawski and Gailey (2021) integrate migration and education into macro-regional population projections, demonstrating that migration substantially alters working-age population size and skill composition across EU regions. However, even substantial inflows do not reverse the structural ageing documented in Eurostat statistics, which show that more than one fifth of the EU population is aged 65 or older. The European Commission's Demography Report links high emigration in Eastern Europe to accelerated dependency ratios and regional depopulation, reinforcing the argument that migration redistributes demographic pressure rather than eliminating it.

The New Economics of Labour Migration, associated with Stark and Bloom, reframes migration decisions as household strategies for income diversification and risk management. This perspective aligns closely with OECD evidence on Romania, which documents both the scale of emigration and the importance of remittances. World Bank remittance data confirm sustained financial inflows, yet the literature on brain drain and brain circulation, particularly the work of Docquier and Rapoport, cautions that remittances cannot fully compensate for human capital losses if return migration and reintegration policies remain limited. OECD migration outlooks further emphasise that sustained outflows of working-age cohorts intensify labour shortages and fiscal pressures in ageing societies.

Governance scholarship adds a distinct analytical dimension. Geddes conceptualises EU migration governance as a domain characterised by political salience and intergovernmental bargaining constraints. Lavenex describes the evolution of external migration policy as a form of external governance, extending regulatory influence beyond EU territory. Niemann and Zaun conceptualise post-2015 developments as a system of remote control, highlighting readmission agreements, partnerships with transit countries and strengthened border operations. Carrera and Guild critically examine the securitisation of asylum policy, arguing that crisis framing has normalised exceptional procedures within EU law.

Institutionally, these theoretical developments correspond with the strengthening of the European Border and Coast Guard and the expanded mandate of Frontex. European Parliament research on return policy documents persistent implementation gaps and reliance on third-country cooperation. Bisson and Potemkina (2023) describe ongoing solidarity deficits and reform deadlocks within the Common European Asylum System, even after the adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum. The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive in 2022 illustrates that rapid coordination is possible, yet comparative analyses show that this episode does not eliminate structural tensions between member states over burden-sharing and responsibility allocation.

For Eastern member states such as Romania, these theoretical strands converge in a particularly visible way. OECD analyses estimate that close to one fifth of the Romanian-born working-age population resides abroad, a figure that positions Romania as a central labour exporter within the EU. Simultaneously, recent OECD reporting notes that Romania has expanded third-country labour recruitment to address domestic shortages, illustrating a dual role as both sender and emerging receiver. This duality challenges simplistic core–periphery dichotomies and underscores the need to conceptualise EU migration as a multi-level, dynamic system.

Across this extensive literature, three theoretical tensions remain insufficiently integrated. First, economic models rooted in Borjas-type wage selection frameworks often treat demographic structure as background rather than endogenous. Second, demographic projection models incorporate age and education but frequently abstract from governance evolution and policy-induced changes in flow composition. Third, governance analyses inspired by Geddes, Lavenex or Niemann and Zaun focus on securitisation and institutional

design, yet seldom incorporate the cumulative demographic consequences of persistent intra-EU asymmetries.

A comparative longitudinal approach that integrates economic fundamentals, human capital redistribution, and governance transformation remains relatively rare, particularly with respect to Eastern sending states. Positioning Romania within such a framework is analytically significant because it simultaneously represents the largest EU nationality abroad, a country experiencing measurable ageing acceleration linked to emigration, and a participant in the evolving post-2015 governance architecture. Integrating these dimensions allows migration to be conceptualised not as episodic crisis management or isolated labour adjustment, but as a structurally embedded process reshaping demographic sustainability, economic convergence, and political cohesion across the European Union.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The analysis builds on the premise that migration within the European Union reflects the interaction of economic incentives, demographic restructuring and structural asymmetry across member states. In an integrated labour market characterised by free movement, differences in income levels and employment conditions generate directional mobility pressures. At the same time, sustained flows produce cumulative demographic effects, redistributing working-age population and human capital across regions. These dynamics unfold within a structurally asymmetric system, where Western member states tend to function as net attractors of labour and Eastern member states as net suppliers.

This framework implies that migration outcomes can be understood along two dimensions:
(i) persistent cross-country structural positioning and
(ii) short-run responsiveness to economic conditions.

On this basis, the study advances four hypotheses.
H1 (Structural Asymmetry). Western EU member states exhibit persistently positive net migration rates over 2012–2023, while Eastern member states exhibit persistently negative net migration rates.
H2 (Labour Market Responsiveness). Higher unemployment rates within a member state are associated with lower net migration rates.
H3 (Income Effect). Higher GDP per capita levels are positively associated with net migration balances.
H4 (Romanian Reconfiguration). Romania exhibits signs of structural migration adjustment after 2021, reflected in a moderation or reversal of its historically negative net migration balance.

Methodology

The empirical design of the study follows directly from the theoretical framework and combines comparative descriptive analysis with panel econometric estimation. The objective is to distinguish between structural cross-country asymmetry in migration

outcomes and short-run responsiveness to economic conditions within member states. The first dimension is assessed through systematic comparison of migration indicators across countries over the 2012–2023 period, while the second dimension is examined using fixed-effects panel regression modelling. In addition, the Romanian case is analysed separately in order to identify potential regime change in migration dynamics following recent inflows.

The dataset is constructed from harmonised annual Eurostat data covering the period 2012–2023. Six EU Member States are included in the sample: Germany, Spain and France as established destination economies, and Poland, Bulgaria and Romania as historically labour-exporting states. The selection is intentional rather than random, aiming to capture variation across distinct migration regimes within the European Union. The balanced panel consists of 72 observations, corresponding to six countries observed over twelve years. The time horizon captures both post-crisis recovery dynamics and major systemic shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and migration developments following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The dependent variable is the net migration rate per 1,000 inhabitants, defined as immigration minus emigration relative to total population. Expressing migration as a rate rather than an absolute number ensures comparability across countries of different sizes and isolates the migration balance independently of demographic scale. This measure captures whether a country functions as a net receiver or net sender in a given year.

Two economic indicators operationalise the key explanatory variables. GDP per capita in constant chain-linked volumes is log-transformed in order to capture proportional income effects and reduce skewness in the distribution. The logarithmic specification allows interpretation in terms of relative income changes rather than absolute levels. The unemployment rate for the population aged 15–74, measured according to ILO standards, captures labour market conditions and cyclical pressures. Together, these variables represent income differentials and labour market tightness.

To complement the regression analysis, additional descriptive indicators are examined, including the immigration rate, the emigration rate, and overall mobility intensity defined as the sum of immigration and emigration rates. Mobility intensity allows differentiation between structurally imbalanced systems and high-circulation regimes in which inflows and outflows are simultaneously elevated.

To estimate the short-run economic determinants of migration balances, the following two-way fixed-effects panel model is estimated:

$$NetMigrationRateit = \beta 0 + \beta 1log(GDPpcit) + \beta 2Unemploymentit + \mu i + \lambda t + \varepsilon it$$

Where:
i denotes country
t denotes year
μi captures country fixed effects
λt captures year fixed effects
εit is the idiosyncratic error term

Country fixed effects absorb time-invariant structural characteristics such as historical migration networks, geographic position, institutional quality and long-term development differentials. Year fixed effects control for EU-wide shocks affecting all countries simultaneously, including pandemic-related disruptions and regional displacement effects. This specification isolates within-country variation over time, allowing the estimated coefficients to reflect short-run responsiveness rather than cross-sectional structural differences.

Robust standard errors are used to address potential heteroskedasticity. Given the small macro-panel structure, the interpretation of coefficients focuses on direction, magnitude and statistical significance.

Finally, the Romanian case is examined separately in order to evaluate potential structural adjustment. The time series is divided into three subperiods: 2012–2020, characterised by persistent negative net migration; 2021 as a transitional year; and 2022–2023, during which positive net migration balances are observed. Mean comparison and trend inspection are used to assess whether this shift reflects temporary fluctuation or more sustained reconfiguration of Romania's migration regime.

Results

The descriptive analysis first examines structural differentiation across the six EU Member States included in the sample. Table 1 reports the average net migration rate per 1,000 inhabitants over the period 2012–2023.

Table 1. *Average Net Migration Rate (per 1,000 inhabitants), 2012–2023*

Country	Net Migration Rate
Germany	7.23
Spain	4.09
France	1.76
Bulgaria	1.07
Poland	0.18
Romania	-0.92

Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat data (2012–2023).

Germany and Spain display persistently strong positive net balances, confirming their structural role as destination economies. France maintains moderate positive inflows, while Poland and Bulgaria appear close to balance. Romania remains the only country in the sample with a negative average net migration rate over the full period, indicating sustained outward mobility when evaluated across the entire timeframe. To better understand the composition of these balances, Table 2 decomposes migration into immigration and emigration rates.

Table 2. *Average Immigration and Emigration Rates (per 1,000 inhabitants), 2012–2023*

Country	Immigration Rate	Emigration Rate
Spain	13.15	9.06
Germany	12.32	5.09
Romania	9.57	10.49
Poland	6.12	5.94
France	5.49	3.73
Bulgaria	4.62	3.55

Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat data (2012–2023).

Romania exhibits relatively high mobility intensity compared to other Eastern member states, yet its migration balance remains negative due to emigration exceeding immigration. In contrast, Germany and Spain combine high inflows with comparatively lower outflows, reinforcing their position as net receivers. Poland and Bulgaria display lower circulation levels, suggesting more moderate migration regimes. The Romanian migration trajectory reveals a marked shift over the observed period. Between 2012 and 2020, net migration remains persistently negative, reflecting Romania's established role as a labour-exporting state. In 2021, the negative balance narrows substantially, signalling a transitional phase. In 2022 and 2023, Romania records positive net migration rates for the first time in the sample period. This shift suggests a possible reconfiguration from a structurally labour-exporting regime toward a higher-circulation configuration characterised by simultaneous inflows and outflows. While caution is warranted in interpreting short time windows, the persistence of positive balances over two consecutive years indicates that the change is unlikely to be purely incidental. To evaluate the short-run economic determinants of migration balances, the two-way fixed effects model described in the methodology section was estimated. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Fixed Effects Panel Regression Results*

Dependent Variable: Net Migration Rate

Variable	Coefficient	Robust Std. Error	t-statistic	p-value
Log GDP per capita	-3.624	3.462	-1.047	0.300
Unemployment rate	-1.026***	0.212	-4.841	<0.001
Country fixed effects	Yes			
Year fixed effects	Yes			
Observations	72			
Within R^2	0.36			

***p < 0.01

Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat data (2012–2023). Robust standard errors reported.

The unemployment rate exhibits a statistically significant and economically meaningful negative association with net migration. A one percentage-point increase in unemployment is associated with a reduction of approximately 1.03 persons per 1,000 inhabitants in the net migration rate, holding constant country and year fixed effects. This finding supports the labour market responsiveness hypothesis and indicates that short-run employment conditions materially influence migration balances within EU member states.

In contrast, log GDP per capita does not display a statistically significant within-country effect. This suggests that long-term income differentials across countries are largely captured by country fixed effects, while short-term income fluctuations do not significantly alter migration balances once structural heterogeneity is controlled for. The within R^2 of 0.36 indicates moderate explanatory power, consistent with macro-panel analyses in which migration outcomes are shaped by economic, demographic and institutional factors beyond the variables included in the model. Taken together, the descriptive and econometric findings point to a dual structure in EU migration dynamics. Cross-country comparisons reveal persistent asymmetry consistent with a core–periphery configuration, with Western member states functioning predominantly as net receivers and Romania maintaining a historically negative balance. At the same time, the panel regression demonstrates that

short-term variation in migration balances is primarily driven by labour market conditions rather than short-run income changes. Romania's negative position prior to 2021 aligns with this structural asymmetry, while the post-2022 reversal may reflect both domestic labour market tightening and broader regional shocks affecting mobility patterns. Overall, the evidence suggests that EU migration is shaped simultaneously by structural income hierarchies and cyclical labour market adjustments, operating within an asymmetric but evolving regional system.

Discussion

The descriptive evidence reveals clear structural differentiation across the six countries included in the sample. Over the 2012–2023 period, Germany records an average net migration rate of 7.23 per 1,000 inhabitants, followed by Spain (4.09) and France (1.76). Poland (0.18) and Bulgaria (1.07) display near-balanced positions, while Romania remains the only country with a negative average net migration rate over the full period (-0.92).

These figures indicate persistent asymmetry between established destination economies and historically labour-exporting states. Germany and Spain function as structural net receivers, whereas Romania retains a net-sending profile when evaluated across the entire timeframe.

Decomposing net balances into immigration and emigration rates adds further clarity. Spain and Germany combine high immigration rates (13.15 and 12.32 per 1,000 respectively) with comparatively lower emigration levels, resulting in strong positive balances. Romania, by contrast, exhibits substantial mobility intensity, with an average immigration rate of 9.57 and an emigration rate of 10.49 per 1,000 inhabitants. Its negative net balance therefore reflects sustained outward mobility rather than insufficient inflows. Poland and Bulgaria display lower overall circulation levels, suggesting more moderate mobility regimes.

The Romanian time series shows a notable shift in dynamics. Between 2012 and 2020, net migration remains consistently negative, reflecting its established role as a labour-exporting state. In 2021, the negative balance narrows considerably, marking a transitional phase. In 2022 and 2023, Romania records positive net migration rates for the first time in the observed period.

This development points to a potential structural reconfiguration from a predominantly labour-exporting regime toward a higher-circulation configuration characterised by simultaneous inflows and outflows. While caution is warranted when interpreting short time spans, the persistence of positive balances over two consecutive years suggests that the shift is unlikely to represent mere statistical fluctuation.

The panel regression analysis provides additional insight into the economic determinants of these dynamics. The fixed-effects estimates indicate that unemployment has a statistically significant and economically meaningful negative association with net migration. A one percentage-point increase in unemployment is associated with a reduction of approximately 1.03 persons per 1,000 inhabitants in the net migration rate, holding

constant country and year fixed effects. This finding supports the labour market responsiveness hypothesis and confirms that short-run employment conditions materially influence migration balances within EU member states.

In contrast, the coefficient on log GDP per capita is not statistically significant in the within-country specification. This suggests that short-term fluctuations in income levels do not substantially alter migration balances once time-invariant structural differences are controlled for. Cross-country income hierarchies appear to operate structurally, while intra-country income variation over time does not significantly explain migration adjustments in this sample.

The within R^2 of 0.36 indicates moderate explanatory power, consistent with macro-panel analyses in which migration outcomes are shaped by economic, demographic and institutional factors beyond the variables included in the model.

Taken together, the descriptive and econometric evidence points to a dual structure in EU migration dynamics. Cross-country comparisons reveal persistent asymmetry consistent with a core–periphery configuration, while within-country variation is primarily driven by labour market conditions rather than short-term income changes. Romania's historically negative migration balance aligns with this structural positioning, and the post-2022 reversal may reflect both domestic labour market tightening and broader regional shocks affecting mobility patterns across the Union.

Overall, the results suggest that EU migration outcomes are shaped simultaneously by long-standing structural income differentials and cyclical labour market adjustments, with demographic and geopolitical factors operating in the background.

Conclusions

This study examined migration dynamics within the European Union between 2012 and 2023, with particular attention to Romania's position within the broader European migration system. By combining descriptive comparison with fixed-effects panel estimation, the analysis brought together economic factors, demographic restructuring and institutional context in a single empirical framework.

The evidence points to a persistent structural asymmetry across the Union. Western member states continue to register sustained net inflows, while Eastern member states, especially Romania, have experienced prolonged net outflows for most of the observed period. This pattern reflects more than short-term fluctuation; it is consistent with broader demographic redistribution from East to West and with enduring economic disparities across regions. Labour mobility within the EU remains shaped by this uneven macro-regional configuration.

At the same time, the findings show that migration responds meaningfully to labour market conditions. The negative association between unemployment and net migration indicates that employment prospects play a central role in short-term mobility decisions. Migration

thus continues to operate as an adjustment mechanism within the single market, reallocating labour supply in response to changing economic conditions.

Income differences also matter, though primarily in structural rather than cyclical terms. The absence of a significant within-country GDP effect suggests that long-standing productivity gaps across member states are more influential than short-term income fluctuations. Persistent income hierarchies help sustain established migration corridors, while year-to-year economic variation appears less decisive once structural differences are taken into account.

Romania's trajectory illustrates both continuity and change. For much of the period, the country functioned predominantly as a labour exporter. However, the positive net migration balances observed after 2022 signal a shift toward a more complex configuration characterised by simultaneous inflows and outflows. Even so, demographic ageing and long-term structural constraints remain deeply embedded. Recent developments therefore indicate partial adjustment rather than a definitive transformation of Romania's migration regime.

These patterns also highlight institutional tensions within the European migration architecture. Internal labour mobility operates under the economic logic of free movement, while external migration governance has increasingly evolved toward tighter control and externalisation. The coexistence of economically functional internal mobility and politically contested external migration management reflects the broader dual character of European integration.

From a policy perspective, the results underline the importance of labour market fundamentals in shaping migration outcomes. Employment generation and economic stabilisation remain central to managing mobility pressures. For countries experiencing sustained emigration, demographic sustainability requires proactive strategies that address return migration, diaspora engagement and labour market reintegration. At the EU level, improving coherence between internal mobility and external migration governance remains essential for long-term stability.

This study is subject to limitations. The relatively small panel sample restricts the scope for broad generalisation, and potential endogeneity between unemployment and migration cannot be fully ruled out. Future research could extend the analysis by incorporating wage differentials, skill composition and longer time horizons in order to capture structural transitions more comprehensively.

Overall, migration within the European Union emerges not simply as movement across borders, but as a structural feature of economic integration, demographic change and institutional negotiation. Romania's experience illustrates how peripheral member states navigate both the constraints and the opportunities embedded in an integrated yet uneven regional system.

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