

THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON SOCIAL COHESION IN DESTINATION SOCIETIES. A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Alexandra-Georgiana POENARU¹

Abstract. International migration represents one of the most complex contemporary social phenomena, with profound implications for the demographic, economic, and cultural structures of destination societies. The present paper aims to investigate how migration influences social cohesion, using a sociological theoretical framework and a comparative approach across distinct national contexts (France, Germany, the United States, Romania, Poland, and the Scandinavian states). The study highlights that migration can be understood as an ambivalent phenomenon: on the one hand, it contributes to cultural diversity, demographic revitalization, and economic dynamism; on the other hand, it can generate segregation, identity tensions, and social polarization, especially in the absence of coherent public integration policies. The comparative analysis shows that inclusive integration models (such as those in Scandinavia) foster social cohesion, whereas restrictive or assimilationist models (such as those initially applied in France and Germany) may lead to fragmentation and conflict. In the case of Romania and Poland, as emerging immigration states, the challenges are amplified by the lack of clear policies and by the ambivalent perceptions of the majority population.

Keywords: international migration, social cohesion, integration, social capital, discrimination, multiculturalism

Résumé : La migration internationale représente l'un des phénomènes sociaux contemporains les plus complexes, avec des implications profondes sur les structures démographiques, économiques et culturelles des sociétés de destination. Le présent travail se propose d'examiner la manière dont la migration influence la cohésion sociale, en utilisant un cadre théorique sociologique et une approche comparative entre des contextes nationaux distincts (France, Allemagne, États-Unis, Roumanie, Pologne et pays scandinaves). L'étude met en évidence que la migration peut être comprise comme un phénomène ambivalent : d'une part, elle contribue à la diversité culturelle, à la revitalisation démographique et au dynamisme économique ; d'autre part, elle peut engendrer la ségrégation, des tensions identitaires et la polarisation sociale, notamment en l'absence de politiques publiques cohérentes d'intégration. L'analyse comparative souligne que les modèles inclusifs d'intégration (tels que ceux des pays scandinaves) favorisent la cohésion sociale, tandis que les modèles restrictifs ou assimilationnistes (comme ceux initialement appliqués en France et en Allemagne) peuvent conduire à la fragmentation et au conflit. Dans le cas de la Roumanie et de la Pologne, en tant qu'États émergents d'immigration, les

¹ PhD Professor, „Roman-Vodă” National College, Roman, Neamț,
poenarualexandrageorgiana@yahoo.com

défis sont accentués par l'absence de politiques claires et par les perceptions ambivalentes de la population majoritaire.

Mots-clés : migration internationale, cohésion sociale, intégration, capital social, discrimination, multiculturalisme

Abstract. Migrația internațională reprezintă unul dintre cele mai complexe fenomene sociale contemporane, cu implicații profunde asupra structurilor demografice, economice și culturale ale societăților de destinație. Lucrarea de față își propune să investigheze modul în care migrația influențează coeziunea socială, utilizând un cadru teoretic sociologic și o abordare comparativă între contexte naționale distincte (Franța, Germania, Statele Unite, România, Polonia și statele scandinave). Studiul evidențiază că migrația poate fi înțeleasă ca un fenomen ambivalent: pe de o parte, ea contribuie la diversitatea culturală, revitalizarea demografică și dinamismul economic; pe de altă parte, poate genera segregare, tensiuni identitare și polarizare socială, în special în absența unor politici publice coerente de integrare. Analiza comparativă evidențiază faptul că modelele incluzive de integrare (precum cele din Scandinavia) favorizează coeziunea socială, în timp ce modelele restrictive sau asimilative (precum cele aplicate inițial în Franța și Germania) pot conduce la fragmentare și conflict. În cazul României și Poloniei, ca state emergente de imigrație, provocările sunt accentuate de lipsa unor politici clare și de percepțiile ambivalente ale populației majoritare.

Cuvinte-cheie: migrație internațională, coeziune socială, integrare, capital social, discriminare, multiculturalism

1. Introduction

International migration is one of the most complex and dynamic realities of the contemporary world. The increase in transnational mobility, supported by economic, political, and cultural factors, has significantly changed the structure of today's societies, bringing both opportunities and difficulties for maintaining social cohesion. In recent decades, migration flows have diversified, including both voluntary displacement for work and forced migration generated by conflict, instability, or climate change (Castles, by Haas & Miller, 2019; UNHCR, 2023).

From a sociological perspective, migration cannot be reduced only to demographic changes or economic effects. It must be analysed in correlation with how the destination communities manage to integrate newcomers and maintain social balance. Social cohesion, defined by trust, solidarity, and civic participation, is a central benchmark of stability (Putnam, 2000, 2007). However, these dimensions do not manifest themselves uniformly, as smaller communities appear to be more vulnerable to tensions, while large urban centres develop more flexible coping mechanisms.

Western experience shows that public policies play a decisive role. France and Germany, for example, have tested various models of integration, and the effects are directly seen in the quality of social relations (Favell, 1998). In the United States, the „melting pot” model has long been idealized; however, the current reality reveals the persistence of economic and cultural cleavages (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Thus, these experiences show that no model is universally valid;

Success depends more on the social and political context than on the theory adopted. In Eastern Europe, Romania and Poland have transitioned from being exporters of labor to becoming destination spaces, which presents new challenges regarding the integration and acceptance of diversity (Sandu, 2010; European Institute of Romania, 2020).

In this context, the central question is: how does migration influence the level of social cohesion, and to what extent can integration policies strengthen or weaken communities? In this paper, I propose a comparison between different national contexts, emphasizing both the positive effects (cultural diversity, expansion of social capital, revitalization of aging communities) and the associated difficulties (segregation, identity tensions, discrimination). However, I believe that the emphasis must be placed not only on the analysis of problems, but also on the identification of realistic solutions adapted to each context.

The sociological relevance of the theme is twofold. On the one hand, migration provides fertile ground for testing theories about integration, multiculturalism, and social capital. On the other hand, understanding the impact of migration on social cohesion has practical implications for public policies, integration strategies, and the functioning of democratic institutions. In the current conditions, marked by the intensification of migratory flows and the polarization of the political discourse on immigration, the sociological diagnosis of this phenomenon becomes indispensable for the anticipation and management of social changes.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

2.1. Social cohesion

The concept of social cohesion occupies a central place in the analysis of migration phenomena, as it describes the degree of solidarity, trust, and civic participation within a community. Putnam (2000) defines cohesion in terms of „social capital”, i.e., networks of relationships that facilitate cooperation and collective action. In his subsequent research, the author (Putnam, 2007) pointed out that ethnic and cultural diversity can initially lead to a decrease in social trust, but in the long run, it can stimulate innovation and the expansion of civic communities.

Esser (2006) complements this perspective, arguing that the level of social cohesion is directly conditioned by migrants' ability to acquire language skills and access the host society's social networks. Language works not only as a communication tool but also as a resource of cultural and social capital, facilitating educational, professional, and civic integration. In the absence of it, interactions between migrants and the majority population remain limited, which can lead to forms of isolation and community segregation. From this perspective, social cohesion should not be understood as a static state, but as the result of dynamic processes of adaptation and interaction, in which both migrants and host institutions have an active role.

Similarly, Chan, To, and Chan (2006) propose a multidimensional approach to social cohesion, based on trust, belonging, and economic inclusion, which provides an operational framework for assessing this phenomenon. In their study, entitled „Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research”, Chan, To, and Chan (2006) started from a critical review of the literature on social cohesion, highlighting the need for a clearer definition and a unitary framework of analysis. The authors proposed a multidimensional approach, in which social cohesion is structured in four essential dimensions: trust, belonging, participation, and recognition. To validate this conceptual framework, the research was based on questionnaires applied to representative samples, collected in various social contexts. The data analysis was performed using advanced statistical methods, such as factor analysis and validation models, designed to test the consistency and relevance of the proposed dimensions. The final result was the development of an operational tool to measure social cohesion, which can be applied in international comparative studies and adapted to different cultural and political contexts.

At the same time, Bauböck (2001) demonstrates that genuine cohesion cannot be achieved without recognizing the political and civic participation of migrants, which transforms cohesion into a process of ongoing negotiation between diversity and common solidarity.

In the study „Social cohesion as a real-life phenomenon: Assessing the explanatory power of the universalist and particularist perspectives”, Janmaat (2011) analyses social cohesion at the macro level, trying to determine whether it is influenced mainly by universal factors, such as socio-economic development, the existence of functional democratic institutions and access to education, or by particular factors, related to the specificities of the cultural and historical aspects of each region. Methodologically, the study has an international comparative character, based on data from the *World Values Survey* and other similar sources. The author used indicators such as *social trust*, *perception of equality*, and *consensus on fundamental values*, which he analysed through statistical regression models. The results show that economic development, fair distribution of resources, and democratic institutions support social cohesion, but there are also distinct regional patterns – such as the differences between Western and Eastern Europe – which demonstrate that some forms of social cohesion resist homogenisation processes. In conclusion, Janmaat argues that *social cohesion is a hybrid phenomenon*, determined both by the general socioeconomic conditions and by the cultural and historical context specific to each society. The relevance of this study for migration analysis is significant. The author points out that the integration of migrants and the level of social cohesion cannot be explained exclusively by economic development or by general integration policies, but must also be understood in the light of the historical and cultural particularities of the host states. Thus, it becomes clearer why the same integration policy can produce different results in France, Germany, or the countries of Eastern Europe.

2.2. Theories of migration and integration

The study of migration has generated several theories on how individuals and groups integrate into destination societies. One of the earliest approaches is the theory of assimilation formulated by Gordon (1964), which describes integration as a linear process, whereby migrants gradually adopt the values, norms, and cultural practices of the majority. Although influential in classical sociology of migration, this perspective has been criticized for its rigidity and inability to capture hybrid identities or transnational processes (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Moreover, the exclusive focus on migrants' adaptation neglects the role of the host society and institutions in shaping the integration process.

In contrast, the models of multiculturalism proposed in the 1980s–1990s promoted the recognition of cultural differences and the coexistence of multiple identities within a common framework of citizenship (Bauböck, 2001). They are based on the idea that diversity is not an obstacle, but a resource for the host society, provided that the rights of minorities and equal access to resources are guaranteed. However, Joppke (2004) points out that multiculturalism has entered a "political decline" in many Western states, replaced by more restrictive integration policies focused on linguistic and civic requirements and the testing of loyalty to majority values. This change reflects the tensions generated by globalization, the refugee crises, and the rise of populist parties, which have brought the idea of national cohesion back into question.

A more recent direction is interculturalism, which emphasizes dialogue between groups and building a common space for interaction. Favell (1998), analyzing the case of France and Great Britain, demonstrates that the success of integration depends on the way in which the state articulates citizenship rights and the recognition of diversity. Interculturalism proposes a more flexible approach than multiculturalism, encouraging mutual participation and continuous negotiation of identities, rather than mere coexistence. In this regard, Esser (2006) emphasises that integration cannot be separated from the acquisition of language skills and access to the social networks of the host society, elements that constitute the prerequisites for social cohesion.

Thus, the evolution of migration theories shows a shift from assimilative and unidirectional visions to models that recognize the dynamic, interactive, and bidirectional character of integration. New approaches no longer look at migrants only as passive beneficiaries of policies, but as social actors who contribute to the reshaping of communities and collective identities.

2.3. Social capital and migration

The link between migration and social capital has been intensively studied, as social networks constitute both a support for migrants and a bridge of interaction with the host community. Portes and Rumbaut (2006) show that transnational networks facilitate economic and social integration through access to information, resources, and job opportunities, but can also produce enclave effects when they remain closed to the majority society. In this case, internal

solidarity turns into a self-protection mechanism, which, while providing security, limits contact with the institutions and social networks of the local population.

In the case of Romanian migration, Anghel (2013) demonstrates that community networks in Italy functioned as resources of material and symbolic support, facilitating finding a job, accessing housing, and maintaining cultural ties. However, the same networks have generated dependencies and contributed to the reproduction of relatively closed occupational and social models, which can limit long-term integration. This situation shows that social capital is ambivalent: it can be a cohesive factor when it promotes civic participation and openness to the host society, but it becomes an obstacle when it reinforces segregation and community isolation.

In the study entitled „Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research”, Chan, To and Chan (2006) argue that to function as a cohesion resource, social capital must be understood not only as internal solidarity (“bonding social capital”), but also as openness to external links (“bridging social capital”), which facilitates intergroup contacts. In the same vein, Putnam (2007) notes that ethnic diversity may initially cause retreat into homogeneous networks, but in the long term, through sustained interactions, it stimulates the expansion of social capital and the strengthening of civic communities. Thus, the social capital of migrants must not only be analysed in terms of internal support, but also in terms of the degree of connection to the institutions and networks of the host society. In the absence of this balance, the risk is that community solidarity will turn from a resource of integration into a factor of social fragmentation, with direct consequences on the level of cohesion.

3. International migration and its effects on destination societies

International migration produces multidimensional transformations in destination societies, affecting economic, cultural, and political structures. From a sociological perspective, these effects can be classified into two broad categories: opportunities for social cohesion and challenges that can lead to fragmentation and conflict.

3.1. Positive effects on social cohesion

A first positive effect of migration is *cultural diversity*, which can stimulate innovation and creativity in host communities. Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2019) argue that ethnic diversity contributes to economic and cultural dynamism, especially in large urban centers. In the same vein, Bauböck (2001) points out that societies that promote multicultural recognition can turn cultural differences into a resource for social cohesion.

Migration also plays an important role in *demographic and economic revitalisation*. European countries facing an ageing population benefit from the contribution of migrants to the labour market, contributing to the sustainability of social systems (OECD, 2022). From this point of view, migration is a partial solution to labour shortages and demographic imbalances. Moreover, migrants' social

networks can generate new forms of social capital, connecting local communities with transnational spaces. Portes and Rumbaut (2006) show that these networks facilitate economic integration and the expansion of opportunities, while Anghel (2013) highlights, in the case of Romanians in Italy, that community solidarity can support social integration and access to resources.

3.2. Challenges and risks to social cohesion

Although migration brings significant benefits, it is often perceived as a source of social fragmentation. In the paper "The retreat of multiculturalism in the liberal state: Theory and policy", Joppke (2004) shows that in many Western societies, the policies of multiculturalism, although initially designed to recognize cultural diversity, have had the side effect of consolidating relatively closed *ethnic enclaves*, in which interactions between migrants and the majority population have been limited. This situation has fuelled debates on the *decline of multiculturalism* and led states to adopt civic integration policies, focused on language requirements and the promotion of common values. From the perspective of social cohesion, this phenomenon can reduce the level of intergroup trust and civic participation, transforming multiculturalism from a tool of recognition into a factor of fragmentation when intercultural dialogue is lacking.

Another challenge is *discrimination and xenophobia*, phenomena that fuel identity tensions and affect the stability of social relations. Putnam (2007) argues that diversity, when not managed through inclusive policies, can lead to the withdrawal of individuals from community life and the erosion of social capital, reducing the level of generalized trust. From the perspective of acculturation processes, Berry (1997) shows that the attitudes of the majority towards migrants decisively influence the integration strategies adopted by them. In contexts marked by discrimination, migrants tend to opt for separation or even marginalization, avoiding contact with the host society, which weakens social cohesion. Instead, where there are inclusive policies and a framework for recognizing diversity, the integration strategy is favoured, which combines the maintenance of one's own cultural identity with active participation in the majority community. Thus, discrimination and xenophobia not only hinder integration but also generate the risk of *persistent identity cleavages* between majorities and minorities.

4. Benchmarking of national contexts

International migration manifests itself differently depending on the historical, political, and economic context of the destination countries. This section looks at the impact of migration on social cohesion in six contexts: France, Germany, the United States, Romania, Poland, and Scandinavia. The comparison of these cases makes it possible to identify the factors that favour or hinder social integration and the maintenance of community cohesion.

4.1. Western Europe: France and Germany

France and Germany have strengthened migratory traditions, but with different models of integration. In France, the republican model emphasizes cultural assimilation and the standardization of civic values, which can reduce the visibility of ethnic differences but often generates tensions among migrants who want to preserve their cultural identity (Favell, 1998). Brubaker (1992) points out that this approach derives from a tradition of universalist citizenship, in which national membership is based on the adoption of common norms and values rather than ethnic origin.

Germany, on the other hand, initially adopted a „guest-worker” model that involved temporary economic integration, but not social integration. This has led to urban segregation and difficulties in strengthening social cohesion (Castles, by Haas & Miller, 2019). Koopmans *et al.* (2005) point out, however, that in recent decades, Germany has evolved towards more inclusive policies, adopting elements of civic and multicultural integration, in an attempt to respond to the realities generated by long-term immigration.

This difference in approach between France and Germany shows that integration models are not uniform, but reflect *distinct historical and institutional traditions*, which shape both the migrant experience and the level of social cohesion in destination societies.

4.2. The United States: the „melting pot” model

The United States is a classic example of integration through the „*melting pot*” model, in which cultural differences are gradually absorbed into a common American identity through the adoption of the values, norms, and practices of the majority (Gordon, 1964; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). This model implies a progressive assimilation, in which minorities gradually lose their distinctive cultural features to integrate into the dominant social and economic framework. However, recent research shows that the integration process is not uniform and that there are persistent ethnic and economic cleavages, especially in large cities, where residential segregation, unequal access to quality education, and limited economic opportunities affect social cohesion (Putnam, 2007).

Portes and Rumbaut (2006) point out that while the „melting pot” may facilitate the economic and linguistic integration of the first generations of migrants, it does not necessarily guarantee long-term social equality. Research on the second and third generations points to the persistence of structural inequalities, subtle discrimination, and segregation in schools or neighbourhoods, which limit intergroup interaction and affect social trust. In this context, the American model shows that integration through cultural absorption can work to create a common identity, but it does not automatically eliminate economic and social barriers, which implies the need for active policies of inclusion and equal opportunities.

4.3. Scandinavia: inclusive models

The Scandinavian countries – Sweden, Norway, and Denmark – are examples of relatively inclusive integration policies, characterised by a strong focus on social equality, access to education, and civic participation. Bauböck (2001) stresses that these policies aim not only at economic integration but also at the development of extensive social capital, which facilitates intergroup interactions and the maintenance of social cohesion. The OECD (2022) confirms that government interventions in education, language, and vocational training contribute to reducing inequalities and stimulating the active participation of migrants in civic life.

In addition, Scandinavian models emphasize intercultural dialogue and community mediation through local programs that encourage cooperation between migrant communities and the majority population. This type of approach limits the risk of social isolation and facilitates cultural integration, while maintaining an inclusive collective identity. However, even in these favourable contexts, rapid diversity and consistent migration flows can generate local tensions, such as pressures on urban infrastructure or conflicts over the perception of cultural identity. It stresses that, regardless of the national model, integration remains a dynamic process, requiring proactive, adaptable policies underpinned by a sound legislative and institutional framework (Esser, 2006; Favell, 1998).

Thus, the Scandinavian models provide an example of a balance between recognising cultural differences and maintaining social cohesion, demonstrating that inclusive policies and investments in social capital can alleviate the tensions generated by migration.

The comparative analysis of the models presented highlights some essential conclusions:

1. **The integration model adopted by the state** directly influences social cohesion: inclusive models foster trust and civic participation, while restrictive models can produce segregation (Favell, 1998; Bauböck, 2001).
2. **The social capital of migrants** plays an ambivalent role: strong networks support economic integration but can limit interaction with the majority society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Anghel, 2013).
3. **Public perception and local policies** affect social cohesion: polarizing discourses and a lack of clear policies increase tensions and reduce community trust (Putnam, 2007; European Institute of Romania, 2020).

Migration is therefore not in itself a factor of fragmentation, but its effect on social cohesion depends on the complex interaction between policies, social perceptions, and community networks.

5. Conclusions

International migration is a complex phenomenon with significant effects on social cohesion in destination societies. Theoretical and comparative analysis has shown that migration can bring both benefits and challenges, and its impact

depends on the interaction between public policies, migrants' social networks, and the perception of the majority population. On the one hand, cultural diversity, demographic and economic revitalisation of host societies as well as the expansion of social capital and the creation of networks of mutual support are some of the opportunities brought by migration. On the other hand, social fragmentation, ethnic segregation, identity tensions, and negative perceptions of the majority population are some of the challenges to social cohesion.

International migration is not a negative or destabilising factor in itself; its effects depend on how destination societies manage diversity, integrate migrants, and foster civic participation. Migration, when supported by effective public policies, active community involvement, and intercultural dialogue, can be a **driver of social cohesion**, supporting sustainable development and strengthening stability in contemporary societies.

References

1. Anghel, R. G. (2013). *Românii din Italia: Migrație, rețele sociale și capital social*. Iași: Polirom.
2. Bauböck, R. (2001). *Multiculturalism and citizenship: International comparative perspectives*. Ashgate.
3. Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation, *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5–34.
4. Brubaker, R. (1992). *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany*. Harvard University Press.
5. Castles, S., de Haas, H., Miller, M. J. (2019). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (6th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
6. Chan, J., To, H.-P., Chan, E. (2006). Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research, *Social Indicators Research*, 75(2), 273–302.
7. Esser, H. (2006). Migration, language and integration, *AKI Research Review*, 4, 1–55.
8. Favell, A. (1998). *Philosophies of integration: Immigration and the idea of citizenship in France and Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan.
9. Gordon, M. (1964). *Assimilation in American life: The role of race, religion, and national origins*. Oxford University Press.
10. Janmaat, J. G. (2011). Social cohesion as a real-life phenomenon: Assessing the explanatory power of the universalist and particularist perspectives. *Social Indicators Research*, 100(1), 61–83.
11. Joppke, C. (2004). The retreat of multiculturalism in the liberal state: Theory and policy, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 55(2), 237–257.
12. Koopmans, R., Statham, P., Giugni, M., & Passy, F. (2005). *Contested citizenship: Immigration and cultural diversity in Europe*. University of Minnesota Press.
13. OECD. (2022). *International migration outlook 2022*. OECD Publishing.
14. Portes, A., Rumbaut, R. G. (2006). *Immigrant America: A portrait* (3rd ed.). University of California Press.
15. Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
16. Putnam, R. D. (2007). E pluribus unum: Diversity and community in the twenty-first century, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30(2), 137–174.
17. UNHCR. (2023). *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2022*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.