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Social Networks, Attachment and Integration:

Understanding the Church Attendance of Romanian Migrants

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Abstract

Why do some migrants attend church more than others? This article uses an original survey conducted on first-generation Romanian migrants to identify the determinants of such a behaviour. Our study tests the explanatory power of three categories of determinants: migrants' social network, their ties with the home country and the integration in the host society. The analysis uses individual level data from a survey conducted on 1.839 Romanian migrants. We find that the contact with many migrants and high attachment to the home country lead to more frequent church attendance. At the same time, the presence in an organization and the integration difficulties encountered in the host society steer migrants away from church. These results contribute to a better understanding of the diaspora dynamic in terms of religious behaviour and provide an assessment of how specific cultural manifestations are shaped.

Keywords: church attendance, migrants, social network, attachment.

Introduction

Research on transnational migration explores in detail the ways in which migrants live between two worlds. As part of this process, migrants build new lives in their host countries. These include activities, routines, experiences that are shaped by different cultural and social elements from their previous or current environment. The importance of church in the life of migrants has been intensely documented (Levitt, 2003; van Tubergen, 2007; Maliepaard and Phalet, 2012). Much research illustrates how religious practices can maintain traditions, enhance cultural heritage or form identities among migrants (Bowen, 2004; Snyder, 2012; Smits and Ultee, 2013). Among the religious practices, church attendance is one of the most common forms. Little attention is paid to church attendance among migrants and how this can be shaped by various factors. The topic is relevant for at least two reasons: to understand the dynamic of diasporas in terms of religious behaviour and to provide an assessment of how

cultural manifestations are shaped. So far, church attendance has been investigated in relation to various groups in society, e.g. youth, religious denominations (Demir and Urberg, 2004; Clements, 2017), but migrants' church attendance is quite under-investigated.

To address this gap in the literature, our article aims to identify the determinants of church attendance among the Romanian migrants. The analysis argues and tests the explanatory potential of three categories of determinants: migrants' social network, their ties with the home country and the integration in the host society. The analytical framework bridges several strands of literature and aims to provide a comprehensive account of church attendance relative to both home and host country. The article uses individual level data from an original survey conducted in 2018 on 1839 first-generation migrants. The methodology combines bivariate and multivariate statistical analyses. The key findings confirm two of the theoretical expectations according to which the contact with many migrants and high attachment to the home country lead to more frequent church attendance. However, the presence in an organization and the integration difficulties encountered in the host society steer migrants away from church. Both findings have important implications for the study of religious behaviour of migrants.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the literature on church attendance and formulates six testable hypotheses. Next, we briefly present the research design of this study with emphasis on the case selection, data and methodology. The third section includes the analysis and interpretation of the main findings. The conclusion reflects on the implications of this analysis and discusses avenues for further research.

Theory and Hypotheses

This section argues that three major categories of determinants can influence the church attendance of migrants. First, the social networks developed by migrants with their co-nationals in the country of residence increase the possibility to participate in events closely related to shared traditions, beliefs and culture. Second, the emotional attachment to the home country reflects the existence of strong cultural bonds, which may be conducive to church attendance, especially when living in societies that are religiously different from the home country. Third, the difficulties to integrate in the host society can drive migrants to find

refuge in church attendance, where they can seek for spiritual advice or consolation. Each of the following sections briefly explains how these determinants can produce an effect.

Social networks

Migrant groups may get close to religious institutions when seeking to maintain and even enrich their cultural heritage and when aiming to faster integration in the host society (Brinkerhoff, 2016). The churches have a prominent role in creating bridges between the home country and that of residence: "religion is a global societal system as transnational in its operation as the economy or the nation-state, [so] it is no surprise that migrants use religious institutions to live their transnational lives" (Levitt, 2003, p. 848). Religious participation among migrants appears to be influenced by the share of co-religionists and the local religious denominations (Connor, 2009b; Voas and Fleischmann, 2012).

The presence of co-nationals / religionists in migrants' social networks can take two forms: membership in associations or organizations and networks established by individuals. To start membership, previous studies show that migrants who are members and participate in non-religious organizations, including mainly co-nationals, have higher levels of religiosity in comparison with those dominated by locals (van Tubergen, 2007). The presence of migrants in associations and organizations aiming to promote ethnic and / or cultural identity can strengthen such feelings and can determine migrants to expand their manifestation through frequent church attendance. Regarding individual social networks, large concentrations of migrants from the same home country are likely to increase the levels of religiosity (van Tubergen, 2007; Connor, 2009a). Accordingly, "such areas provide a strong religious community for the immigrant, in which social control is stronger than it is in areas with few co-ethnics" (van Tubergen, 2007, p. 750). At the same time, research conducted among Muslim minorities in the Netherlands illustrate that migrants who engage in friendships with the natives experience lower levels of religiosity (Phalet, Gijsberts and Hagendoorn, 2008). Dutch Muslims who have more co-ethnic friends attend more frequently religious service compared to those who are isolated or have more locals in their social network (Phalet, Gijsberts and Hagendoorn, 2008; Maliepaard and Phalet, 2012).

The reason behind this is that regular involvement in organized religious activities gives migrants a sense of connection with other co-religionists. This sense is one of belonging to a familiar and friendly community and the feeling of being supported, accepted and protected

(Ciobanu and Fokkema, 2017). Such feelings are important for migrants because they relocate to new societies where it is often difficult to establish immediate relationships. The connections with co-nationals living in the same country can provide an anchor to previous traditions and enhance a behaviour towards shared practices such as attending religious service regularly. The church can play an active role in helping the migrants with their integration, especially when it comes to asylum-seeking support (Snyder, 2012). Consequently, in conjunction with larger communities of migrants, the church can be a point of reference to individuals. Following these arguments from the literature, we expect that the high attendance of religious service among migrants to be the result of:

H1: Membership in a migrant organization or association in the country of residence
H2: A high number of co-nationals known in the country of residence.

Attachment to the home country
Church attendance of migrants is linked to the cultural values, traditions, and beliefs with which they were socialized in the home country. The emotional attachment with the home country appears to be an important driver for religious behaviour. The latter can be connected both with the pre-eminent role of religion in the home country and with the inner identification with such a culture and society (Vertovec and Rogers, 1998). For example, the young Vietnamese immigrants in New Orleans who attend religious services and participated in different activities financed by the church are less influenced by the American culture decadent influences and more attached to their ethnic community (Zhou and Bankston III, 1998). An analysis among the Turkish and Moroccan subpopulations from the Netherlands underlined that their Muslim self-identification and mosque attendance are more likely to be linked than in the case of other foreign immigrants (Smits and Ultee, 2013).

The frequency of church going is associated with an increased sense of racial group identification (Jeong, 2014). The latter occurs when the migrants feel connected to the country of origin. Quite often, the churches from the host countries play an important role in alleviating longing for native places, home or friends, mitigating the sense of isolation and loneliness felt among the strangers and offering a very familiar, intimate and sentimental cultural environment (Chong, 1998; Hirschman, 2004). The role of churches to preserve the national identity is described in the case of Coptic diaspora in the USA as follows: "One of the

serious challenges has been the age-old tension facing immigrant communities: maintaining a strong communal identity while dealing with the pressures of 'compromise' associated with assimilating into a new society" (Saad, 2010, p. 220).

One important indicator for the belonging to the home country is the desire of migrants to return. This desire is often based on emotional elements that involve an idyllic image of their home country, marked by stories, experiences and memories, connection with their family or relatives, or social networks that exist prior to their migration (Tsuda, 2003; Kraler *et al.*, 2014; Erdal and Ezzati, 2015). The desire to return to the home country is shaped by cultural and historical background features (Cassarino, 2004). The migrants who desire to return have strong cultural connection with the home country and thus more inclined to attend religious services, especially if that is something that is traditionally done in the home country. As a result of these arguments, we expect that the frequency of church attendance is likely to be positively influenced by:

H3: High attachment to the home country
H4: High intention to return to the home country.

Integration Difficulties

Earlier studies show that the length of stay in the host country is positively associated with church attendance (van Tubergen, 2007). This goes against the social integration theory according to which migrants who spend time adapting to the values and norms in host societies become over time alienated from those in their country of origin (Alba and Nee, 2003), including religious ethics and behavior. The influences of the country of origin in the case of migrants become weaker and irrelevant when the duration of stay in the host country increases (Frank and Hou, 2015; Vargas, 2016). Thus, if the cultural connection positively influences church attendance, as indicated in the previous section, the length of stay may have a negative impact on it.

For first-generation migrants, there is a negative relationship between integration in the host society and religiosity (Voas and Fleischmann, 2012). On the contrary, shorter stay in the host society is likely to maintain traditions with the home country and increase religious attendance. More research goes in this direction and findings show that when individuals are strongly integrated into a particular social community (e.g. religious institutions), they share

and comply with its rules, standards and norms (van Tubergen, te Grotenhuis and Ultee, 2005).

In addition to the length of stay, there are other types of integration difficulties that can influence church attendance among migrants. The religious Muslim female migrants in Southern California, especially due to the stigma after 9/11 events, continue to be and feel psychologically and culturally isolated from the host society (Ozyurt, 2013). However, the Mosque attendance continues to be high and is associated with civic engagement and political participation. Difficulties of integration in the host society are also associated with limited social contacts with the natives in everyday life. In the absence of such contacts, migrants could attend religious service more frequently to connect with some of their co-ethnics (Voas and Fleischmann, 2012).

Other scholars explain that religiosity and difficulties of integration in the host society reinforce each other. On the one hand, migrants' high levels of cultural, religious and ethnic peculiarities of them can represent negative triggers toward the process of integration (Koopmans, 2016). An analysis of three communities of migrants in the US reveals that the Mexican one, including most of the irregular migrants or with low social support availability, has the highest degrees of church going (Yoshikawa, 2011). Similarly, an analysis of the Moroccan migrants in Italy indicates that when facing the danger of unemployment, they felt discriminated against and received support from their families and religious communities (Sacchetto and Vianello, 2016). In this case, the connection with religious institutions is a result of integration difficulties. Consequently, we expect that church attendance to be high among those migrants who have:

H5: Shorter stay in the host country

H6: Difficulties of social or cultural integration in the home country

Controls

In addition to these six effects, we control for three socio-demographic features often associated with church attendance by earlier research: age, gender and education. The effects of age on church attendance are unclear. Some studies show that older people are frequent churchgoers (Schwadel, 2011), some indicate that religious attendance is stable over adulthood life and decreases in late life (Bengtson *et al.*, 2015), while others find no effect of

the age on church attendance (Greeley, 1989). The effect of gender appears to be more straightforward. Earlier research conducted on belief and practice internationally indicates that women tend to be more religious than men (Miller and Hoffmann, 1995; Francis, 1997; Francis and Penny, 2013). There is mixed evidence regarding the effects of education on church attendance. On the one hand, some studies show positive association between these two variables (Brown and Taylor, 2007; Glaeser and Sacerdote, 2008). On the other hand, research indicates that the completion of tertiary education decreases church attendance (van Ingen and Moor, 2015).

Apart from these controls included in the analysis, we also tested for the effect of other variables that could, according to the literature, influence church attendance by previous research, e.g. medium of residence, media exposure or occupational status. There is no empirical support for any of them and they are not reported in the findings, to keep the explanatory models parsimonious and easier to interpret.

Research Design

The article uses individual level data from an original survey conducted among Romanian migrants in January 2018. The dataset includes 1,839 answers collected from first generation migrants. The Romanian migrants are selected as subject of this study due to the size of diaspora and high levels of religiosity reported for the Romanian population. According to the UN estimates, the Romanians living abroad form the fourth largest diaspora in Europe relative to the country population (UN Report, 2017). In terms of religiosity, Romania ranks at the top of European countries on a constant basis over the last decades (Naletova, 2009; Marica, 2018).

The survey was distributed online mostly through messages on Facebook groups or discussion forums of Romanians living abroad, and by e-mails sent to representatives of Romanian associations and organizations. The survey uses a convenience sample in which the respondents are neither pre-selected nor part of a pool of available individuals. This type of sampling is used for two reasons. First, without official reliable statistics regarding the Romanian migrants, we cannot know the features of the entire population. As such, there is no possibility to use probability representative sampling. Second, we aim to include the irregular migrants who cannot be included. Research on a convenience sample has some disadvantages: the findings are confined to those who answer the survey it is difficult to have

generalizable results. Research on migrants often uses convenience samples due to limitations in reaching out to respondents. The great variation across the independent, control and other sociodemographic variables, and the large number of surveyed attitudes provide access to valuable data, which is not otherwise available. Although the survey has no explicit age limit, all respondents are between 19 and 71 years old, with no bias in terms of age and education.

Variable measurement

The dependent variable is measured on a 8-point ordinal scale as the answer to the following question: "How often do you go to Church?". The available answers range between "not at all" (coded 0) and "daily" (coded 7). The membership in an organization (H1) is a dichotomous variable through which respondents are asked to claim their membership in any organization or association of Romanian migrants in the country of residence; these can include sport, leisure, cultural or religious associations. Those who are members are coded 1, otherwise 0. The size of the social network (H2) is measured through the number of Romanian migrants known by the respondent in the same host country. The answers range between "none" (coded 1) and "more than 200" (coded 6). Emotional attachment with the country or origin (H3) is measured on a five-point ordinal scale based on the following question: "How emotionally attached do you feel to Romania?". The possible answers range between "not at all" (coded 1) and "very much" (coded 5). The country was chosen as point of reference to be consistent with what captured by the other questions. The survey asks respondents about attachment to the region and locality in which they lived prior to migration and both correlate highly to country attachment.

The intention to return (H4) is measured on an 11-point ordinal scale as the answer to the following question: "How likely is it for you to return to live in Romania in the following two years?". The respondents can choose between different values on a scale ranging between 0 (very low likelihood) and 10 (very high likelihood). The length of stay in the host country (H5) is measured on a five-point ordinal scale that takes values between "less than six months" (1) and "more than 6 years" (5). The relations with friends from the country of origin (H3) is measured through the answers provided to the following question "How often do you keep in touch with your friends in Romania (relatives are excluded)?". The answers are coded on a five-point ordinal scale that ranges between "not at all" (1) and "very often" (5). The cultural and social accommodation difficulties (H6) is a dichotomous variable coded 1 when

the respondents answers that they personally encounter such difficulties in the host country. The measures for controls are straightforward: age is measured as the year of birth, gender is coded 1 for female and 2 for male, and education is measured on a seven-point ordinal scale that ranges from "primary school" (1) to "postgraduate studies" (7).

Methods

The methodology combines bivariate and multivariate statistical analysis. The correlations explore the bivariate relationships between each variable included in the hypotheses and controls, on the one hand, and the frequency of church attendance, on the other hand. We report the non-parametric correlation coefficients because the vast majority of variables are ordinal. This is followed by an ordered logistic regression, which is required by the ordinal measurement of the dependent variable. This includes two models: one without the control and one with controls. The regression analysis does not report country level models. There are theoretical reasons to run them. The Romanian migrants have several preferred host countries but also live in many others. This is reflected in our sample of respondents: almost 70% live in Italy, Spain, UK, Germany, France and the United States. The remaining 30% live in 38 countries around the world as far as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore or Tonga. In addition to the density of migrants, some of these countries have closer cultural ties with Romania. However, the statistical models with country dummies did not provide much

Before running the regression, we test for the presence of multicollinearity in two ways. First, we check the correlation coefficients of the relationships between all independent and control variables. The results indicate no highly correlated predictors with the highest value being 0.37. Second, the values of the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) do not exceed 1.35, which indicate that there are no reasons for multicollinearity concerns. For all the variables, the "DK/NA" answers are treated as missing values and excluded from the analysis.

Cultural Connection, Social Networks and Church Attendance

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of the church attendance among the Romanian migrants. The vertical axis includes the percentages corresponding to the answers available on the horizontal axis. This distribution indicates that a large share of the respondents attends church seldom. The cumulated percentage of those who attend religious service once to three times per year (the second and third column) is almost 40%. Almost one quarter of the surveyed

migrants do not attend church at all. At the other extreme, less than 2% of the respondents attend church on a daily basis. In spite of this preponderance, there is considerable variation in the church attendance. For example, the percentage of those who attend religious service on a weekly basis is equal to the percentage of those who go to church on a yearly basis. The percentage of those who attend church several times per week is higher than the percentage of those who display the same behaviour once per month.

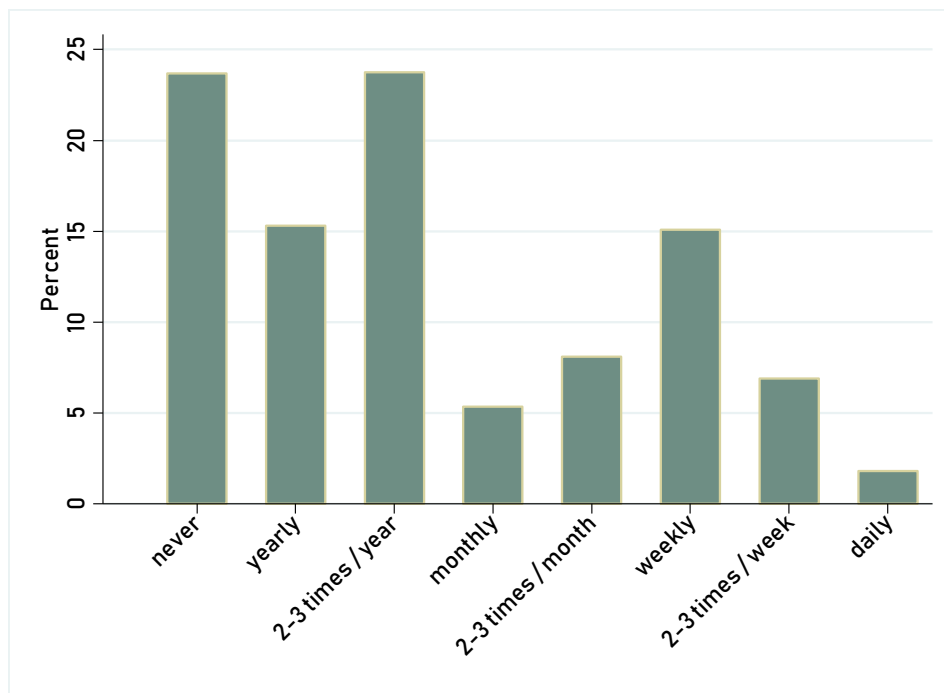**Figure 1: The Distribution of Church Attendance among the Romanian Migrants (N=1828)**

Table 1 includes the results of the bivariate relationships. All coefficients are statistically significant: most of them at the 0.01 level; only the accommodation difficulties and gender are at the 0.05 level. The direction and size of the coefficients provide empirical support for half of the hypothesized relationships. The results indicate that higher social networks developed with Romanian migrants in the same host country (H2), higher emotional attachment to Romania (H3) and intention to return (H4) are associated with higher frequency of church attendance. The values of the correlation coefficients allow ranking them according to the strength of the association. This matches entirely the order of the hypotheses. The correlations show no empirical support for the remaining three hypotheses. The evidence goes against the theoretical expectations. The respondents who are members in any association or organization of Romanian migrants (H1), have a shorter period of stay in the

host country (H5) and face accommodation difficulties (H6) attend church less frequent than the other Romanian migrants. The correlations between the controls and the dependent variable indicate that old, male and highly educated respondents attend religious service more regularly compared to young, female and poorly educated Romanian migrants answering the survey.

Table 1: Correlation Coefficients with Church Attendance

	Correlation coefficient	N
Membership (in organization)	-.35**	1828
Social network	.39**	1828
Emotional attachment (home country)	.25**	1789
Intention to return	.10**	1755
Length of stay	.22**	1828
Integration (difficulties)	-.05*	1828
Age	-.20**	1777
Gender	.06*	1818
Education	.10**	1828

Notes: The correlation coefficients are non-parametric (Spearman).

      ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Figure 2 displays the effects resulted after running the ordinal logistic regression. It is associated to the model without controls because we wanted to present first the hypothesized effects; the complete statistical models are available in Appendix 1. These effects confirm to a great extent the results of the correlation analysis, but also provide some relevant nuances. The interpretation of results is relative to the group of migrants who never attend church, i.e. the reference category. All effects are statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Similar to the bivariate correlation, there is empirical support hypotheses 2, 3 and 4. The respondents who know more Romanian migrants in the same host country (H2) are 1.44 times more likely to attend church on a regular basis compared to those with a limited social network. This is the strongest predictor among the variables that go in the hypothesized direction. Those migrants who feel strong emotional attachment to their home country (H3) are 1.35 times more likely to attend church regularly compared to those who do not feel emotionally attached to

Romania. The intention to return (H4) also has a positive effect on church attendance, but its size is small and quite close to statistical independence. This is the weakest effect among the hypothesized relationships.

The effect of three variables goes against the hypothesized effect. The membership in organizations (H1) leads to limited church attendance. This effect is the strongest among the hypothesized effects. One possible explanation for this result is that church attendance is an individual decision, independent from membership in an organization. Another possible explanation points in the direction of a mild version of the classic secularization thesis. Respondents who join organizations and associations of Romanian migrants use their activities and meetings as ways to fill up their social life instead of attending religious service. These organizations are alternatives to spending the free time at church. This is line with earlier findings according to which involvement in associations decreases the level of religious service attendance among migrants because it provides alternative avenues for cultural and ethnic identity (Alanezi and Sherkat, 2008).

Romanian migrants with longer period of stay in the host country (H5) attend the church more than those who arrived recently. One possible explanation can be a better structure of activities and more efficient resource allocation for those living for a while in the host country. Those who migrate recently have to sort out many things upon arrival related to their integration into the new society. They often struggle to allocate resources between their life in the host country and their families in the country of residence. All these take time and this reduces the possibility to attend religious service. These results confirm earlier findings for groups of migrants less developed countries living in the US according to which a longer period of stay in the host society is positively associated with a regular religious attendance (Akresh, 2011).

Finally, those who face accommodation difficulties (H6) have lower church attendance compared to those without such difficulties. The possible explanation for this effect is that the migrants with such problems use their time and resources to address them rather than going to church. The well-being of migrants is positively linked to their social inclusion in the host society (Çetin, 2019). In that sense, the high attendance of religious services is not a reflection of isolation or a refuge from daily problems. Instead, it can be seen as an activity resulted from "feeling like home".

Figure 2: The Effects on Church Attendance
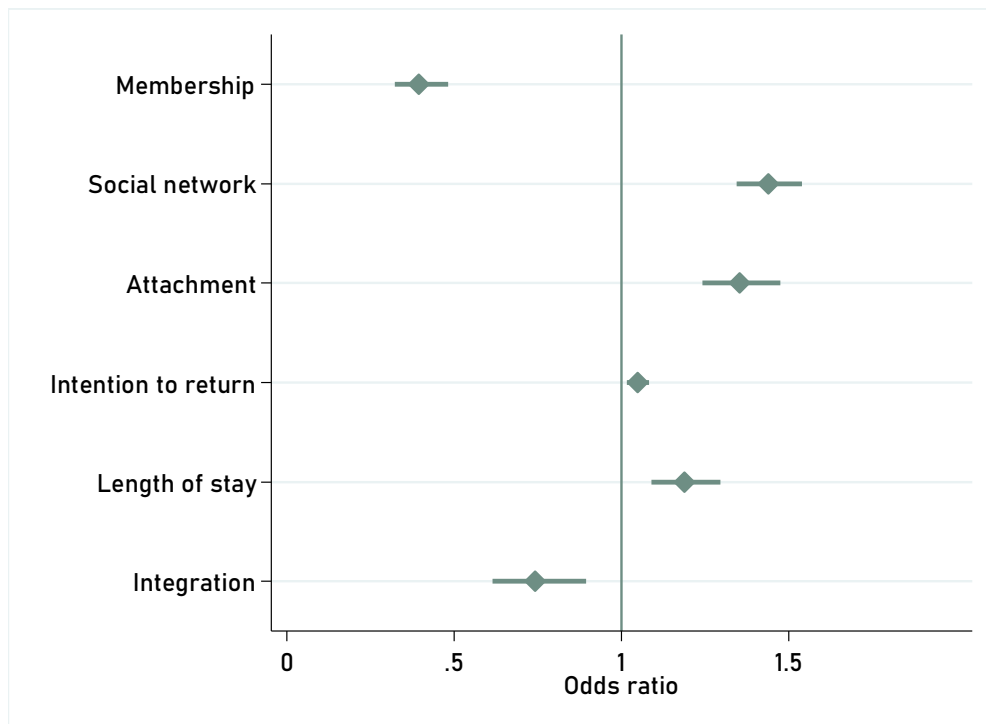
Note: The regression analysis associated to the figure is in Appendix 1 (Model 1)

The pseudo R^2 reported in Appendix 1 indicates that model 2 better fits the outcome data than model 1. This can have three explanations: there is an added explanatory value of the education variable, there are fewer cases (due to missing values on the controls) and thus the explanatory power may be higher for these, and the higher number of variables. Among the controls, only education has a statistically significant effect on church attendance: higher educated migrants attend more often than those with lower education. Age and gender have no impact on church attendance among the surveyed migrants.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article aimed to explain why some migrants attend church more often than others. The analysis conducted on individual level data from a survey ~~conducted~~ among both regular and irregular Romanian migrants provides several meaningful results. The size of the social network in the host country, the emotional attachment to the home country and the desire to return increase the likelihood of attending church often. The membership in an organization of Romanian migrants, longer period of stay and the existence of accommodation difficulties limit the church attendance.

These findings point in the direction of several broad observations regarding the behaviour of the surveyed migrants. First, church attendance is rooted in the cultural closeness that the respondents feel towards their home country. Many of the countries to which they migrate are not Orthodox, which is the religious denomination of most Romanians. In this context, church attendance can be the reflection of cultural ties and attachment to the country of origin. It can have a symbolic value in additional to the spiritual dimension. Second, church attendance is an individual choice that is not tied to the membership in an organization of migrants. It is associated with a larger social network but not in an organized form. More precisely, the contact with many Romanian migrants leads to more frequent church attendance. However, the presence in an organization is likely to steer migrants away from church. Third, Romanian migrants do not go to church to compensate for the inadaptation to the host society. On the contrary, our results illustrate that those without cultural and social accommodation problems and migrants who spend more time in the host country are likely to have regular religious attendance. This confirms earlier findings according to which religion is important for the Romanian migrants who cope well with the challenges of migration (Ciobanu and Fokkema, 2017).

The analysis has important theoretical implications, which go beyond the single case study analysed here. It suggests an analytical framework to explain the church attendance of migrants, which has been under-investigated so far. This framework is not context sensitive and can travel across various political settings. It shows the relevance of several key features related to migrants' life in the host country and attachment to the home country. In doing so, the framework connects several components of the social and cultural space and provides the possibility to be enriched with other determinants.

Further research can take the discussion in the direction of explaining the causal linkages. This article identifies several potential sources of migrants' religious behaviour but does not explain how the causal relationship is shaped. Such an explanation requires different types of data, which can be collected with semi-structured interviews, focus-groups or experiments. These can focus on why migrants consider religious behaviour as an important activity and what pushed them in that direction.

Appendix 1: Ordinal Regression Analyses

	Model 1	Model 2
Membership (in organization)	.39**	.41**
Social network	1.44**	1.45**
Emotional attachment (home country)	1.35**	1.36**
Intention to return	1.05**	1.05**
Length of stay	1.19**	1.15**
Integration (difficulties)	.74**	.78**
Age		.99
Gender		1.05
Education		1.12**
N	1732	1682
Pseudo R^2	.07	.08
Log likelihood	-3014.98	-2919.06

Notes: Reported regression coefficients are odds-ratios.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

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