## E-GOVERNANCE IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY: DIASPORA-BUILT PRACTICES ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*Antonia JEFLEA*

On behalf of:
Asociația Română de Sociologie

# E-Governance in times of uncertainty: diaspora-built practices on social media during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Antonia JEFLEA[1]

## Abstract

E-governance is essential for migrants to ease access to various administrative services in their home and destination countries. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed novel facets of inequality in the accessibility of these facilities, the lack of personnel during lockdowns being not the only impediment for foreigners. This paper aims to research the unequal access of the Romanian diaspora in Germany to digital solutions provided by authorities and the unprecedented circumstances that occurred during the medical emergency. The data analysis revealed how people built their e-governance networks on social media groups, providing alternative solutions to their issues and needs. Diaspora's relationships with governmental bodies are often priorly mediated via online communication in diasporic groups, where people ask for advice or present their approaches. Data collection has been done mainly on Facebook groups of Romanian migrants in Germany between 2020 and 2022. Methodologically wise, this research used digital field research to understand how people interact in these groups and what consequences could arise from their digital behaviour.

Keywords: migration, digital governance, COVID-19 pandemic, return migration, alternative governance.

## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, e-governance had to constantly reshape to satisfy and fulfil the needs of specific parts of the population. In Germany, there has been a variety of online platforms designed by governmental bodies to ensure the prompt and correct information of citizens: from websites collecting daily

[1] PhD Student at Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Ludwig Uhland Institut für Empirische Kulturwissenschaft, Tübingen, GERMANY. E-mail: diana-antonia.jeflea@student.uni-tuebingen.de.

data about the pandemic situation and mobile applications registering live-time contacts with people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus to changes on most administrative websites to comprehend the real-time modifications in different processes.

Regardless of these continuously changing updates, parts of the population could not benefit from these adjuvant digital practices. Romanian immigrants in Germany rarely interact with German authorities concerning documents and other administrative issues, as these services are made for citizens. Thus, diasporic communities must seek help at local embassies and consulates. Their dependence on these institutions reached a critical point during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the limited personnel, the high number of requests, and the slow and inefficient communication between authorities and Romanian citizens. Moreover, the linguistic barrier often blocks them from accessing news and regulations in their host country, as many have no or limited proficiency in German.

Through this research, I aim to understand the availability and the extent to which e-governance solutions were accessible and used by permanent and temporary Romanian workers in Germany in various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Theoretical approaches

*Literature review*

The Romanian diaspora located in Germany encompasses permanent migrants, long-term temporary migrants who relocate to the destination country for a minimum of 12 months, aiming to return to their home countries, seasonal migrants who have two or three major working blocks per year, and trans-national migrants who constantly cross the borders in their daily tasks. Precarity leads to higher use of mobile phones for informational resources and generally for internet access (Barendregt, 2012), as smaller devices tend to be less expensive. Thus, many immigrants use their mobile phones to access the internet, specifically social media, which is also a characteristic of Romanians in Germany. They use Facebook to communicate with their families via the Messenger application, for entertainment (reels, photos, memes, and short movies), and for information and news (via groups).

The main reasons for migration from Romania to Western Europe have long been known, as studies on various parts of the Romanian diaspora have been done since 2007, with precariousness (Van Mol, & de Valk, 2016) and the search for better social security packages being the principal causes of these flows, particularly for people in rural areas. Values such as the absence of corruption or reliable structure are taken into consideration by skilled migrants coming from

urban regions when deciding to assume some risks and leave their country of origin, without being forced by an uncertain socio-economic family situation (Emilsson, & Adolfsson, 2019; Salamonska, & Czeranowska, 2019; Török, 2017; McCollum, 2017). In recent years, a new approach focuses on novel facilitators for migration, social media being one of the most prevailing ones (Dekker, & Engbersen, 2014).

There are many factors with which social media participates in the sustenance of migratory practices, such as establishing links with people in the destination country, distribution of successful migration stories, or acquiring jobs. During crises, migrants tend to thrive for social interaction in the online world, especially if they suffer from precariousness (Nancheva, 2022). Social media have a better impact on migrants than on their children, as only half of the latest render contemporary communication means as beneficial for their relationship with their parents abroad (Madianou, 2017).

Yet social media are also the tool that keeps migrants from a complete integration process because of their physical space narrowing capacity between the person in discussion and their peers back home (Plascencia, 2016).

Social media also serve as the apparatus through which migrants have their first contact with their destination countries, chosen after a prior online selection (Ciobanu, 2015). A place's utility (Wolpert, 1965) is determined after examining the successful migrant stories supplied on Facebook groups or the available data regarding the working conditions specified on the same online platform.

## Methodology

I used combined methods to question the digital support offered by German and Romanian authorities to migrants concerning documentation, pandemic-specific issues, or any other concerns. The leading methodological approach used is the field of netnography (Hine, 2000; Kozinetz, 2011; Pink, 2016), as most of the research occurs on Facebook groups and institutional websites provided by German and Romanian authorities. Kozinet's definition of netnography remains actual for the current research in which I observe the opinions and experiences of Romanian immigrants in Germany regarding governance and e-governance within online communities (Kozinets, 2011). Data analysis consists of the observation through digital means of various interactions between social media users to comprehend and document the digital identity-building of the community of Romanian immigrants in Germany concerning digital governance means.

Doing and undoing multi-sited ethnography in this research from the perspective of an insider, I follow the premises of Sara Marino, engaging with the field and learning from the everyday practices, use of technologies, and behaviours of Romanian migrants on Facebook groups (Marino, 2020).

As the present research focuses on the use of e-governance services by Romanian immigrants in Germany and the new forms of digital governance on social media, digital politics anthropology plays a determining role in mitigating the gap between real-life politics and their application in the digital World (Postill, 2012). Viral campaigns from the political sphere on social media have the ability to establish successful e-governance strategies for migrants.

The main research questions that guide this research are:

*1. What are the benefits and challenges of using social media as a platform for e-governance in diasporic communities?*

*2. What are the limitations of e-governance tools provided by German and Romanian authorities to Romanian immigrants in Germany?*

*3. How does the digital divide affect the accessibility and inclusivity of e-governance initiatives on social media within diasporic communities?*

*4. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the Romanian diaspora in Germany?*

## Data collection and research limitations

This research aims to answer the question of e-governance implications on the lives of Romanian immigrants in Germany, focusing on the situation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant observation has been done on public and private diasporic groups on Facebook, such as *Emigrant in Germania*, *Romani in Stuttgart*, *Români pentru românii din Germania*, *Comunitatea română din Germania*, *Romani in Germania*, and others. My access to these groups was easier as I identify myself as part of the Romanian diaspora in Germany.

I chose these groups due to their large number of members and intense activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also before and after it. All of them encompass over 30 000 members, and while they have individual moderation regulations, they allow job announcements, and their principal stated purpose is to inform and guide Romanian citizens in their integration process in Germany.

To obtain an initial comprehensive image of the status of the current accessible digital governance tools, I analyzed both solutions offered by Romanian authorities for diasporic communities and solutions provided by German authorities for people living in this country. Public data analysed about the accessibility of e-governance platforms can be found on the following websites: *e-consulat.ro*, *mae.ro*, *termine.crossing.de*, *reutlingen.de*, *service.berlin.de*, *allaboutberlin.de*, *stuttgart.de*, *service.stuttgart.de*, *muenchen.de*, and *stadt.muenchen.de*.

Ethical concerns arise when trying to define what is public and private on social media, as there is still a lack of consensus between social scientists (Silverman 2015). Privacy of groups changes under various circumstances, with administrators taking this decision without questioning other members. Kozinets sees communities built on Facebook as *living, breathing, and thriving* (Kozinets, 2011).

Their fluidity is determined by the flow of new members and the interactions between them and the existing ones. Another fluidity-determining factor is the adherence of novices to the practices accepted by affiliates with more experience. Moreover, although a few groups are "private", there is no *de facto* blocker in becoming a member, and not all people from the groups adhere to the specified demographics.

One of the research's limitations consists of the continuous dynamics of these social media communities, as discourses can target a specific response, posts edited, access to comments constrained, members eliminated from groups, and Facebook posts deleted at any time.

# Data analysis

*The Romanian diaspora*

Romania has large diasporic communities, ranked fifth in the World, with more than five million Romanian citizens living and working abroad, most of them in Italy, Spain, Germany, the UK, and France (OECD, 2019). Official data show that in Germany, the Romanian diaspora is the largest coming from the European Union states, encompassing at the end of 2022 883670 people. It is only outnumbered by the Turkish, Ukrainian, and Syrian communities, with 1 487 110, 1 164 200, and respectively 923 805 people, the last two countries currently being conflict zones (Statistisches Bundesamt DESTATIS, 2023).

There is limited data on seasonal migrants and short-term temporary emigrants from Romania, which make up a significant component of the whole emigrational picture. However, statistical data in the last four years provide a comprehensive representation of the resident population decrease, migration being the second most prominent factor for this process (INS, 2019; INS, 2020; INS, 2021; INS, 2022).

Romania also ranks sixth among the top-EU countries for receiving intra-EU migrants, the most recent peak being during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly due to its citizens returning to their home country, after work-related stays abroad (Mooyaart, & de Valk, 2021).

In Germany, the highest concentration of Romanian immigrants is, besides the most populous cities - Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, or Hannover, located in *Kreise* and *Landkreise* in the Southern and Western part of the country (fig. 1; Statistisches Bundesamt DESTATIS, 2021).

Ausländer: Kreise, Stichtag, Geschlecht,
Ländergruppierungen/Staatsangehörigkeit

*Ausländerstatistik*
*Ausländer (Anzahl)*
*31.12.2021, Insgesamt, Rumänien*
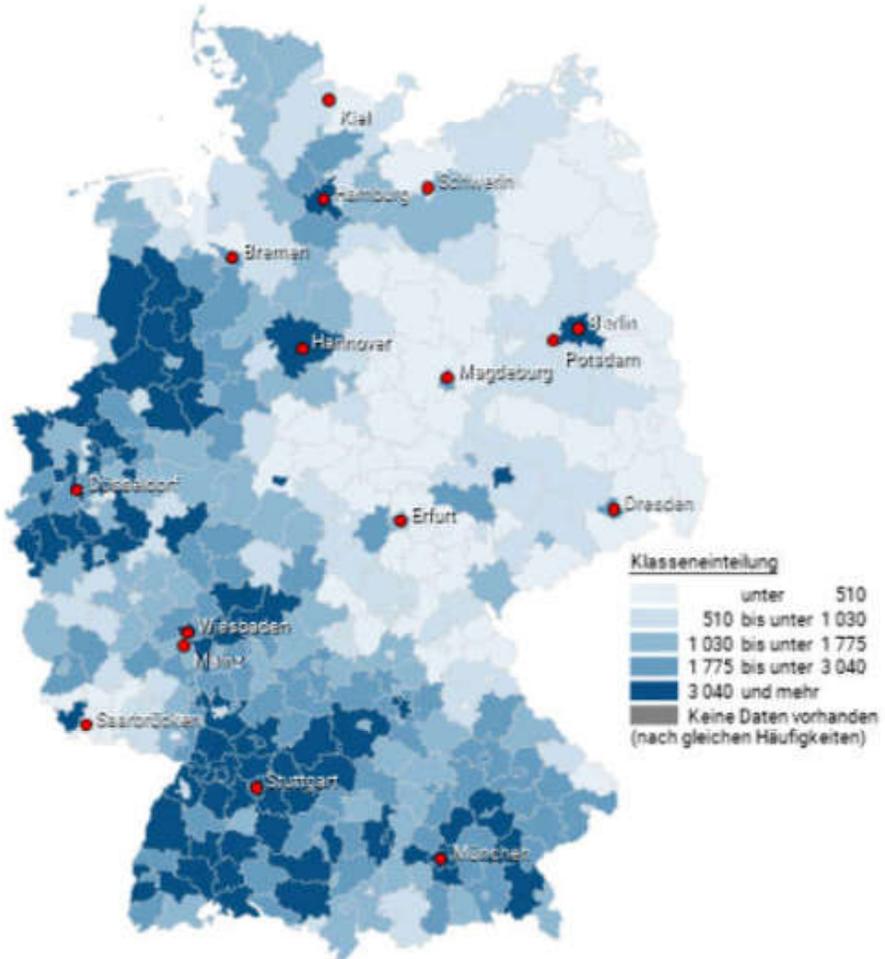


© Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2023 | Stand: 24.03.2023 / 11:05:05

*Figure 1. Localization of Romanian migrants in Germany at 31.12.2021*

The Romanian diaspora has a strong feeling of not belonging. People implied in the migration processes question their belonging to their home and the host countries. In other words, first-generation Romanian immigrants experience the effects of transnationalism, which characterizes home as a set of links between several different places (Levitt, & Glick Schiller, 2004). For seasonal migrants, the question of belonging is not so poignant, as they consider themselves guests in the destination country. They refer to Romania as "here", their permanent home and Germany as "there", where they work for a pre-determined amount of time before returning.

Due to the faced difficulties in both socio-cultural spaces, many Romanian immigrants end up feeling rejected by everyone: they must leave Romania, mainly because of financial reasons, but simultaneously they are not entirely accepted by Germany and its citizens, because of linguistic barriers, their migrant status, and other factors. Due to the linguistic barriers and the unavailability of skilled jobs not requiring business-fluent German, many Romanian immigrants begin their migration ways with occupational mobility that only turns into ascending occupational mobility, once they learn the language (Rooth, & Ekberg, 2006).

Many people who migrate from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe are blue-collar workers, who are not only part of the physical diaspora, but also the digital diaspora. They work in agriculture, elderly care, slaughterhouses, transportation, and logistics. Thus, they can only use limited Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in their daily life and often appeal to the same platforms they use for communication or entertainment to obtain information about their relationship with the host state.

Romania has a short migration history because of its political scene before 1989. However, when borders opened, people started seeking a better life abroad. Migration waves have become stronger after Romania joined the European Union in 2007 (Sandu, 2010).

Linguistic and cultural barriers represent the main integration blockers for Romanian blue-collar temporary and permanent migrants in Germany. Many people coming to Germany either have no previous German knowledge or limited work-related vocabulary. People in the second category are usually employed via intermediary workforce placement agencies, which either request a minimum level of German or provide their potential employees with German courses accepted by the destination country.

*Romanian diaspora and the COVID-19 pandemic*

From my ethnographic incursions and deep digital field research on social media, I have found that minorities are disappointed in e-governance options provided by local and national authorities. Added to other factors, it led to a broader return migration during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, rejection from both states was the principal attitude Romanian immigrant workers in Germany felt. First, conventional media in Romania portrayed them in the early waves of the medical emergency as "virus spreaders".

Cases in which people returning from their host countries escaped the quarantine regulations and organized events circulated on mainstream communication channels. In the online sphere, this led to numerous counter-offensive attitudes in the comments section, where permanent Romanian citizens started blaming their co-nationals for "bringing the virus from abroad and killing the Romanian population". When infection clusters began to appear in Germany, Romanian authorities left those people in the lurch, saying they were not seasonal workers but employees of German companies. In this way, social rights become negotiated between the home country, the destination state, and representatives of employers. While neither wants to take accountability, Romanian immigrants do not benefit from their social rights to the full extent in harsh conditions.

At the same time, German media portrayed Romanian immigrants as virus-spreaders and infection-clusters causers, funding their discourse on a few cases of improper accommodation facilities in slaughterhouses and asparagus farming industries, where these people could not benefit from proper distancing and quarantine opportunities when needed. Even articles targeting the government's poor response towards the crisis administration focused on the nationality of workers implied in infection clusters, nurturing feelings of hate among a group of Germans, and compassion in others.

It is mandatory to note that migrants negotiate political life across borders (Marlowe 2019), which makes Romanian citizens located for determined periods abroad more prone to maintaining a firm connection with issues in their home country. Considering the return desires of many Romanian blue-collar workers in Germany, political parties which encompass in their agenda the image of migrants are more prone to be successful in this group.

Gradually othering the Romanian migrants led to their search for a political solution that could bring upfront a discourse based on the difficulties of diasporas. Therefore, AUR, a far-right political party, gained popularity in these communities, being the only one that fundaments its agenda of bringing them back home to a safer place, where they are accepted and not treated as intrudes.

*Digital practices of Romanian diasporic communities*

This paper focuses on the digital practices of Romanian immigrants in Germany on social media groups. The medium these people use most, both for communication with their families and interactions with other members of the Romanian diaspora, is the Facebook suite. While Facebook Messenger remains the principal tool for creating strong bonds with family members left back in their

home country, specifically via its video conference feature, Facebook Groups are a social medium miming offline meeting points.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments across Europe tried to support diasporas with relevant repatriation measures, information about quarantine and certificate requirements, and medical advice. Regarding travelling between states, however, information on official websites, such as The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was not updated live, providing people with insufficient or irrelevant information. Contradictions between requirements for travelling appeared at the end of 2020. Due to these, Romanian citizens had to find contact options to ask for further details or upload their experiences on social media. Groups on Facebook became a principal source of information, where people engaged in posts, and exchanged their approaches regarding border crossing in the European Union.

Romanian public institutions had to change their approach to a collaborative one, instead of the previous unidirectional information flow (Dolea, 2021), by creating live Q&A sessions. However, this channel only solved a few issues because of the limited duration and the large spectrum of interest topics. Thus, diasporas had to find self-governing methods, mainly inspired by the official approach. Syndicates in Germany started to conduct similar sessions for migrants from Eastern European countries to address their needs. Fair Mobilitaet brought experts and translators to debate and disseminate information regarding work during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, where thousands of Romanian workers participated.

The Romanian Consulates in many German cities encountered a requests management issue during the early stages of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The online appointment system for Romanian Consulates, e-consulat, was launched in 2015. Since then, many citizens have encountered problems with it, mainly due to the long waiting times, accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the narrowed availability of appointment slots, and the limited workforce. Thus, many members of the Romanian minority in Germany confronted the incapacity of using e-governance solutions. Diaspora had to find quick alternatives for administrative concerns. One solution would be for them to return to their home country to fix bureaucratic aspects, which are time and money-consuming. Another option is paying illegal entities to obtain appointments at the Consulates quicker. In both cases, e-governing platforms fail to support migrants in solving bureaucratic issues.

The ineffectiveness of the consular services provided to its diasporic citizens by Romanian authorities can be noticed through irritation and resentment attitudes expressed on Facebook groups, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic years. When trying to book an appointment on the *e-consulat* platform, users recall the inexistence of available time slots in succeeding months.

Another discontent they evoke is the availability of consular employees to help diaspora members solve their bureaucratic problems. Many members on social

media declare that the better alternative is an administrative trip to Romania in order to obtain documents effortlessly in a shorter time.

Valentin, a member of the *Romani in Stuttgart* group, opens a discussion about the incapacity of Romanian consulates to address the needs of immigrants. He focuses his discourse on the poor services and the high remuneration employees receive for their work: "*Hard, really really really hard, I don't know what these people working in Consulates do, either in Stuttgart or Munich, if they don't answer to Romanians' needs for what are they being paid by the Romanian State. Because, of course, they have outstanding salaries*". Users engage in threads regarding difficulties that Romanians have in Germany in their relationship with their home country, searching for the community's approval but also providing solutions to initially raised questions: "*They "work" on beautiful money...they don't care about the rest; you'd better do your documents in Romania*". Later, the same user that initiated the thread concludes that the solution for Romanian diasporic communities in Germany is not solving their bureaucratic issues in their home country, but rather the reformation of the entire system of foreign affairs: "*You are right, but we are here, and they constituted because of us, to be close to us and our needs. You can't go whenever you want to Romania when you have a job to solve something you could solve in half an hour here if things worked normally.*"

Without a proper solution for e-governance, the Romanian diaspora in Germany had to adapt and find alternative elucidations for their organisational and legislative issues. Solutions include the traditional approach of directly going to the physical Consulate without a prior appointment and filling out the documents, trying to obtain appointments at specific times when they are known to become available, or taking leave to address these bureaucratic aspects directly in their home country. To support a particular approach, users create a thread of comments with the same advice, introducing the personal tackling of the situation element, which raises its credibility. As Ionel, a member of *Romani in Stuttgart*, advises another user to go to the Romanian Consulate: "*It is better to go personally*" Cornelia reinforces his claim by commenting on the same thread: "*If you are from Stuttgart, go directly to the consulate, maybe in that way you can resolve it and obtain an appointment*". Disagreeing with a previously mentioned solution is performed with the aforementioned mechanism. Mariana advises the post creator to continue seeking an appointment: "*Try day and night for an appointment, otherwise you will not solve anything. I received my appointment on the 5th of November after many attempts*", and Delia strongly affirms that there is no alternative to the procedure: "*Without an appointment, you go in vain.*".

The Romanian diaspora has rapidly grown in recent years, one of the main reasons for relocation being the financial one, which led to an outnumbered consular offer for Romanian citizens located abroad (Dolea, 2021). During the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, the issues were accentuated because of lockdowns and loss of personnel. Consular services became more popular as transit between countries became limited, and only people with proof of vaccination, tests,

or quarantine could perform it. At the same time, limitations in the improvement of these services are accentuated. People could not find an appointment and so many requests burdened the existing e-governance platform e-consulat.ro. Social media later showed that those appointment openings happened only twice a month, early in the morning, at 3-4 A.M.

Another alternative governing solution provided by members of Romanian diasporic groups in Germany is the use of quasi-legal paths, such as appealing to another consulate in neighbouring countries (e.g., Luxembourg, France, or Belgium) without being ascribed to it: *"Put a random address in France, near Strasbourg, and make an appointment. You solve it faster like this than with Consulates in Germany. This is how I proceeded last time for my child's passport."*.

Additionally, illegal entities obtained the Consulate or Embassy appointment for the person in need. They booked slots with fictional names and sold them afterwards to people in need, charging them various remunerations. Romanian immigrants acquiesce to these alternatives regardless of their initial doubts: "*Asistenta Acte Romanesti* (Fig. 2) *they immediately make you an appointment, I received it after three days. You can write to them on Facebook for further details. It was 30 EUR. I needed it for my passport. Write to that person because, in a maximum of one day, he answers. He asked me for documents copies (certificates, ID, and Anmeldung) to be able to book the appointment. I was scared to be honest when I sent the documents, but nothing bad happened. They just want the money."*
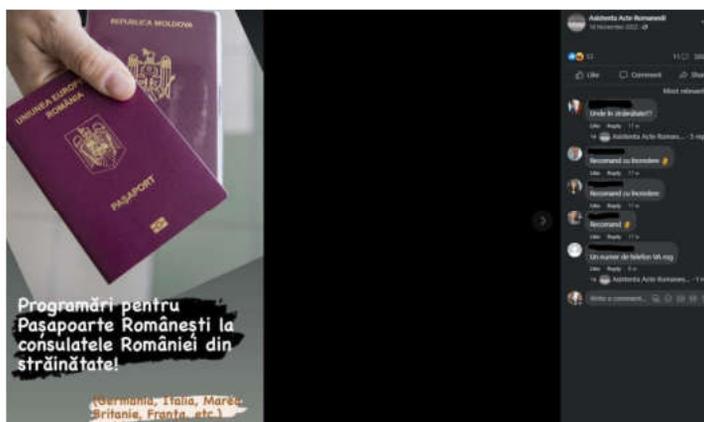


*Figure 2. Asistenta Acte Romanesti Facebook Page*

As previously mentioned, many Romanian migrants are not only part of the diaspora, but also the digital diaspora, which makes them prone to being victims of digital identity loss, as they lack minimum cybersecurity understanding. In this scenario, some members of Facebook groups try to warn people against the previously mentioned para-legal mechanisms.

*"Don't do that! Consulates don't work with any type of intermediaries. This is an issue with which the Consulate has long been faced. These intermediaries simply steal our chances of benefiting from the needed appointments. I spoke about it with someone from the Consulate. It is practically a scam, and if you go there, you'll see there are posters on windows saying there is no activity between the Consulate and any intermediary company! Take care of yourself!"*

Because of the ineffectiveness of consular services perceived by Romanian citizens in Germany, forgery in documents is another approach the diasporic community advises to its fellow members. Thus, although theoretically urgent situations are instantly solved, there is still a divide between these, and the actual usability and effectiveness of e-governance services, since forgery is considered an escape from the burdened system.

*"You need to undergo surgery abroad somewhere…Russia or Turkey. It's not a joke! I did that…"*
*"You go to the doctor and obtain a paper stating that you need to urgently undergo surgery… Eye surgery…Any kind of surgery…With that paper, you go to the consulate, and you'll have your passport ready in two days."*

The ineffectiveness of e-governance can lie in the shift from government-centric approaches to technological ones (Saxena, 2005). Facebook groups act as support groups and alternative governing bodies for diasporic communities. New forms of governance arise on social media as people are obliged to find surrogate solutions inside the community, instead of waiting for them to be provided by the state (Millard, 2010). Via social media posts, people from inside seek to help the community by advertising available appointments for consular services or distributing their successful stories after solving their pre-existent issues.

*"Good evening group! If anybody is interested, right now there are available appointments for the Consulate."*
*"Try almost every time…I think it also deals with one's luck…because we have been trying since autumn and we could never find anything…then, two weeks ago, on a Thursday, we tried continuously for two days and right on the next Tuesday we grabbed a place…good luck."*

## E-governance in destination countries and its availability to diasporic communities – linguistic barriers

In this paper, I refer to e-governance as Dawes defines it – the use of information and technologies to support public services and relationships among citizens and the state (Dawes, 2008). I will also refer to digital governance as e-governance used with the help of mobile devices, as most diasporic communities' members use these devices regularly.

To bridge the digital divide and the gaps between e-governance theories and the practical efficiency of these governance means, local and regional administration bodies must seek to improve their accessibility and quality of interactions (Postill, 2012). Concerning migrants, they usually occur with two different e-governance circumstances. On the one hand, there is the destination country with its bureaucratic implications, and on the other, there is the origin country whose citizens these migrants are. Migrants must maintain ties with both if they are still citizens of their home countries.

One of the main issues of e-governance systems for Romanian immigrants in their relationship with German authorities concerns the linguistic barrier. People without a minimum previous linguistic proficiency in German usually face the most problems in Germany, especially with the bureaucracy. Even though Germany ranks in the top 10 European countries regarding English proficiency (EF EPI, 2022), many institutions lack the accessibility feature of providing various languages versions of their online presence. While touristic information on the websites of the biggest German cities (e.g., Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Cologne, Frankfurt, or Stuttgart) is also in English, administrative aspects are non-existent on these platforms.

Based on a survey concerning data from 2018 to 2022, in the year 2022, around 12.25 million people living in Germany identified themselves as having very good English language skills. 23.55 million people considered they had a good command of English, while 34.8 million had poor or no English proficiency (Statista, 2022). Although the last number has decreased for five years due to migration, many people lack a basic understanding of English.

Seasonal and short-term immigrants to Germany are integral to society. They must undergo the same paths as any other newcomer to the country, the *Anmeldung* being the first bureaucratic aspect a migrant faces when coming to Germany. While the local language is still crucial when dealing with e-governance, we must consider the digital divide, in order to build more effective processes (Mihai, 2020).

The preeminent concern about Germany is, for migrants, the lack of e-governance content available in English. Even though at the federal level, there is adapted content for migrants, with linguistic-specific answers (Fig. 3), people are faced at the local level with difficulties, as most e-governance essential content is broadly available exclusively in German, and in some exceptional cases, in English. Other languages are available only as translated content via Google services, which is not always accurate. Seasonal and transnational migrants often leave their home countries pushed by precariousness. Therefore, they have limited studies, and most do not speak German or English.
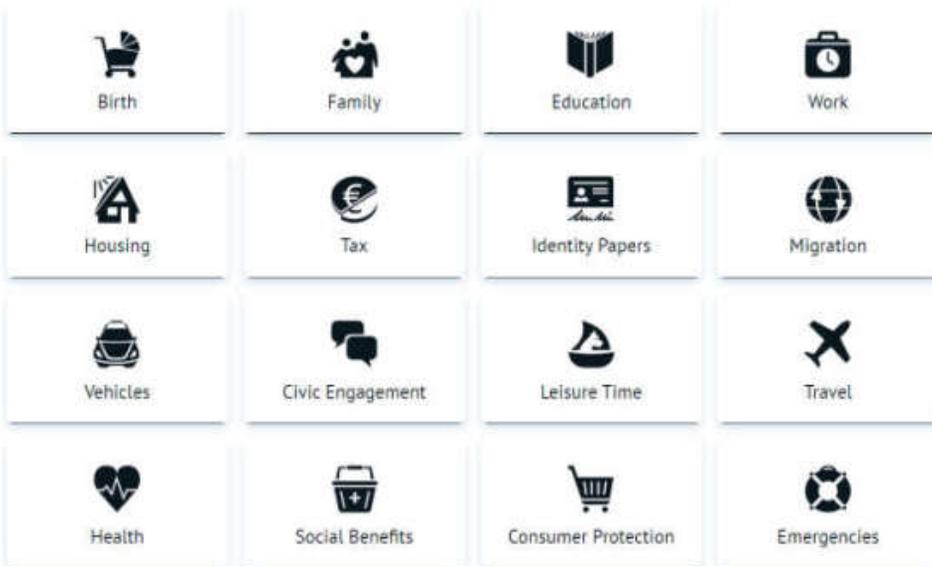
*Figure 3. https://verwaltung.bund.de/ English page of the Federal Portal*

The web pages of local citizens' agencies with integrated e-governance services show that appointment services are only available in German, regardless of the overall migration rate in that region. München, Reutlingen, Berlin, and Stuttgart have citizens' services available in German, with the option of automatic translation into various other languages (Fig. 4).

In Reutlingen, a city in the South-Western part of Germany, one of the most chosen destinations for Romanian immigrants, like in many other German cities, there are administrative offices dealing with migrants, *Ausländerbehörde*. To be more accessible to foreign citizens, this section of the website is also available in English, Turkish, and Russian (Fig. 5). However, it can only be used by international citizens who come from countries outside the European Union, providing specific services targeting these parts of the foreign population. These services include applications for a residence permit, extensions of the existing residence permit, and registration for Ukrainian citizens. Currently, there is no adapted content for immigrants with origin in other European countries, such as Romania and Poland, which remain some of the most relevant origin countries for external workforces in Germany.
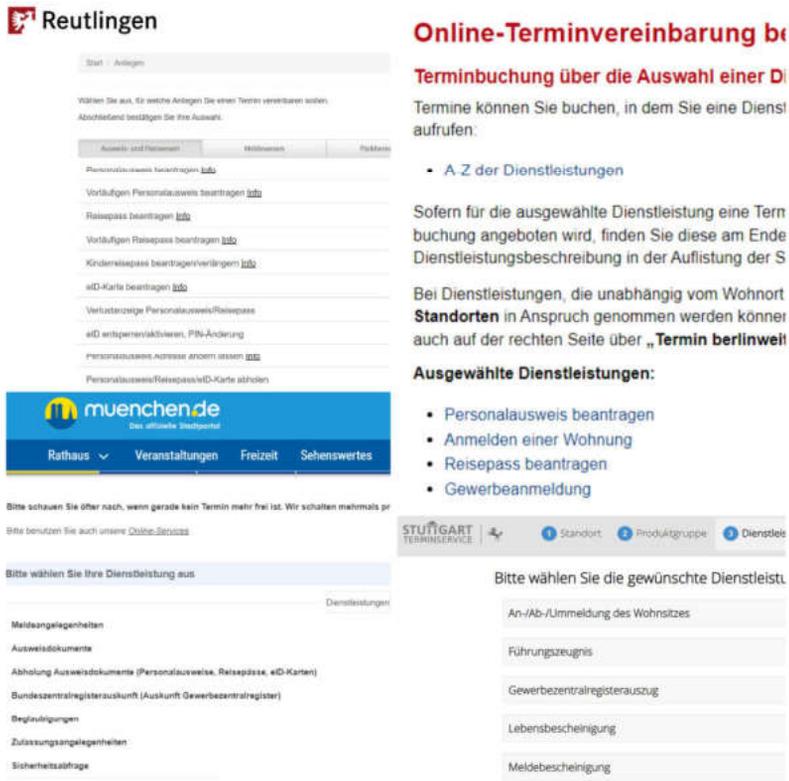
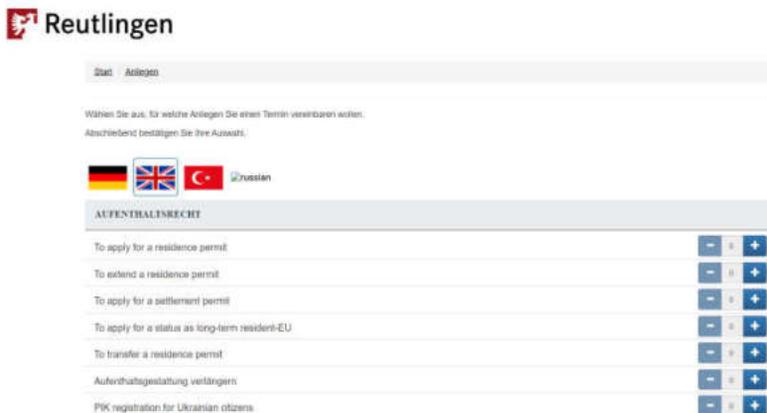*Figure 4. Appointment portals in various German cities*



*Figure 5. Reutlingen's appointment platform for the Office for Foreigners*

Not having explained access to integration materials on e-governance platforms leaves them prone to not knowing their rights and obligations. In this common scenario, there are two options for these migrants: either they work with an intermediary employment agency, or appeal to social media in search of answers.

For blue-collar workers, Facebook groups become their e-governing tool. In this digital field that acts like an authority, people can broadly describe the issues they face, and other members provide them with complex answers from their own experiences. Moreover, these social media also act as psychological support tools, having interpersonal approaches more developed than the traditional governing options (such as local councils, consulates, or embassies).

# Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, e-governance tools have constantly reshaped to accommodate the novel situations Romanian migrants in Germany encountered. Although Romanian and German authorities piloted different approaches to deal with the ever-changing administrative situation, Facebook groups acted as new forms of governance for most migrants.

The lack of content available in the Romanian language on a local level constitutes one of the most significant barriers to the migrant's interaction with public authorities, especially for people who are also part of the digital diaspora or lack German proficiency. Without setting a clear target to improve the accessibility of their online presence for public institutions in Germany, social media will continue to fill this governing gap.

Nevertheless, there are also connected spheres of this topic, mitigation of the risks associated with populist agendas of some Romanian political platforms, and facilitation of the integration process for these migrants being only the most salient ones.

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