

DECOUPLING SELECTION: ROMANIAN MIGRANTS IN SPAIN AND THE UK AND THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN OBSERVABLE AND UNOBSERVABLE TRAITS

DESACOPLANDO LA SELECCIÓN: MIGRANTES RUMANOS EN ESPAÑA Y EL REINO UNIDO Y LA DESCONEXIÓN ENTRE RASGOS OBSERVABLES Y NO OBSERVABLES

HÉCTOR CEBOLLA-BOADO

CSIC, Madrid, España

hector.cebolla@cchs.csic.es

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5804-8715>

MARÍA MIYAR-BUSTO (Corresponding autor)

UNED, Madrid, España

mmiyar@poli.uned.es

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3812-4714>

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore the relationship between positive selection on observable traits and unobservable traits among Romanian migrants in Spain and the United Kingdom. Using comparative data and a standardized index of job search intensity during unemployment, we show that although Romanian migrants in the UK are strongly positively selected on education, this does not necessarily translate into greater resilience or proactive labor market engagement, as measured by job search intensity. In contrast, migrants in Spain display the lowest levels of active job seeking, even lower than non-migrants in Romania. These findings challenge the common assumption in the literature that positive selection on observable traits automatically implies selection on unobservable traits and highlight the importance of considering destination context and structural factors in shaping labor market integration processes.

KEYWORDS: migrant selectivity; education; Romania; unemployment, job search intensity.

RESUMEN

Este estudio examina la relación entre la selección positiva en características observables y no observables entre migrantes rumanos en España y el Reino Unido. Utilizando datos comparativos y un índice estandarizado de intensidad en la búsqueda de empleo durante el desempleo, demostramos que, aunque los migrantes rumanos en el Reino Unido presentan una fuerte selección positiva en educación, esta no se traduce necesariamente en una mayor resiliencia o proactividad laboral, medida a través de la intensidad en la búsqueda de empleo. Por el contrario, los migrantes en España muestran los niveles más bajos de búsqueda activa, incluso por debajo de los no migrantes en Rumanía. Estos resultados desafían la suposición común en la literatura de que la selección positiva en rasgos observables implica automáticamente selección en dimensiones no observables, y subrayan la importancia de considerar el contexto de destino y factores estructurales en los procesos de integración laboral.

PALABRAS CLAVE: selectividad de la migración; educación; Rumanía; desempleo, intensidad en la búsqueda de empleo.

INTRODUCTION

Are migrants positively selected? On what grounds? Beyond selection into emigration, is there selection into destinations or, in other words, if coming from the same country of origin, do migrants obtain different integration outcomes depending on destination? These are increasingly relevant questions as shown by the booming literature on migrant selectivity, which has most often identified selection on observable characteristics, such as educational attainment, as the primary driver of integration outcomes (Palloni et al. 2001; Dustmann and Kirchkamp 2002; Feliciano 2005; Belot and Hatton 2012; Belot and Hatton 2012). It is only recently that the quantitative empirical scholarship on migrant selectivity has expanded to include the role of unobservable individual traits—such as motivation, ambition, or goal orientation—that may also significantly influence integration results (Cunha and Heckman 2007; Akay et al. 2017; Cebolla-Boado and Soysal 2023). Even if these traits are difficult to capture directly in mainstream statistical infrastructures, it is believed that they likely play an important role in shaping how migrants react to adversity.

Within this general logic, our paper has a twofold objective: we seek to understand how selection on observable characteristics happens from one single emigration country into two main European destinations, and how, if positively selected on unobservable traits such as motivation or labor resilience, they may be more likely to actively overcome difficulties, such as unemployment. Our analysis focuses on emigrants from Romania to Spain and the UK, and includes a comparison group of non-movers in Romania. Since the early 2000s, Romania has been one of the largest sources of migration within Europe, with Romanian nationals moving to many EU member states. This migration flow offers an excellent analytical opportunity: Romanian emigration originates in a less advanced economy but, during the study period, involved comparable legal conditions for entry and employment in Spain and the UK. These two destination countries present distinct pull factors, including broadly different labor market contexts leading to different migrant selectivity regimes. To analyze this, we harmonized microdata from the Labor Force Survey, providing a unique empirical opportunity to examine how Romanians react to adversity, i.e. being unemployed, by deploying different job-seeking behavior across countries.

By connecting migrant selectivity to observable characteristics and behavior in the labor market in a multisite comparative framework, this paper makes two significant contributions. First, it provides updated evidence on the characteristics of Romanian migrants in Europe, examining both observable traits (like education) and unobservable traits (such as motivation, measured as job seeking intensity while in unemployment) compared to those who remain in Romania. Second, while previous evidence suggests that the UK attracts a larger share of international talent, indicating a stronger selection effect for education, there is a limited understanding of how migrants are selected on unobservable traits that can make them more likely to look for a job when facing unemployment, which, we claim, is a way of approaching selection on unobservable traits.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on migrant selectivity, paying special attention to the role of unobservable individual traits in shaping migration and labor market outcomes. This is followed by a contextual review of Romanian migration patterns since the early twenty-first century, with a particular focus on the characteristics in Spain and the UK. We then present the data, variables, and methodological approach, including the construction of the job search intensity index as a proxy for unobservable traits. The results section focuses first on selection on education and then compares job-seeking behavior across groups and countries, while the latter section discusses the implications of these findings for the broader literature on migration, selection, and labor market integration.

SELECTIVITY BEYOND EDUCATION IN MIGRATION STUDIES

Over the past few decades, the field of international migration research has been characterized by methodological challenges and theoretical innovations regarding selectivity (Feliciano 2005). The idea that migration results from a selection bias whereby emigrants differ substantially from those who stay behind is not new. Ravenstein's seminal formulations of the "laws of migration" (1889), based on his observations of migration patterns in England and Wales, implied certain selection into emigration among younger people who may have more energy, ambition, and skills. His work emphasized factors such as distance, age, gender, and economic opportunities as drivers of migration. Since then, migration has often been explained as the logical consequence of "movers" being inherently different from "stayers." Yet, the tradition of studying migrant integration in destination countries often overlooked this possibility and essentially opted for choosing research designs where the crucial comparison was between immigrants and natives in destination, failing to consider that the selection occurs at the point of emigration itself. This approach was missing a critical aspect of migration

dynamics, as it ignores the unique characteristics that distinguish emigrants from their relevant comparison groups in origin and destination before they even arrive in the host country.

In facing these ideas, scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century acknowledged the importance of migrant selectivity either as a driving force of migration or as a relevant factor to consider in integration research. However, it often noted that, by itself, selectivity alone could not guarantee successful integration, as discrimination, cultural barriers, and the availability of social networks and support systems also played a role in accounting for outcomes in the host country. Examples of this approach are broadly available. Lee's *push-pull model* of migration (1966) explicitly incorporated the concept of migrant selectivity. The model suggests that migrants are not a random sample of the population, but rather self-selected individuals with particular characteristics and motivations that prompt them to move. The model acknowledges that migrant selectivity can shape the composition of migrant populations and influence their outcomes in destination countries. The seminal research on the *Americanization of migrant wages* by Chiswick (1978) posits that immigrants are self-selected based on their individual characteristics, such as education, language proficiency, and work experience, and that these characteristics play a major role in determining their earnings in the destination country. Chiswick argues that migrants who are better educated, more fluent in the host country's language, and have more work experience are likely to earn higher wages than those who are less educated, less fluent, and have less work experience. Furthermore, this model suggests that migrant selectivity plays an important role in shaping the economic outcomes of immigrants, and that policies aimed at improving the skills and education levels of migrants may help to improve their economic prospects in the host country. Borjas's assimilation model (1987) also acknowledges that migrant selectivity plays a major role in shaping the economic outcomes of immigrants. Portes and Rumbaut's seminal *Immigrant America* (Portes and Rumbaut 2006) proposed that policies could also shift selection patterns into different destinations by fostering arrivals from immigrants with higher levels of education, work experience, and social and cultural capital, which may help to improve the adaptation and integration of immigrants into the host society. Finally, Feliciano (2005) highlighted the role of family and social networks in shaping migration decisions, and the implications of selectivity for immigrant outcomes.

In sum, while the tradition of studying migrant selectivity has been around for some time, it is only in recent years that the literature on the subject has gained momentum and has started to incorporate these ideas into empirical analyses. This is not only due to increasing awareness regarding the importance of selection into migration as a structural bias that nuances the results of mainstream integration research, but also thanks to significant improvements in data quality that have enabled researchers to make threefold comparisons between movers and stayers in origin and destination affordable. As a result, we can now document selection into emigration, selection into different destinations, and, less frequently, disentangle selection effects from other processes that occur during migrants' integration into their host societies. In recent years, researchers have been able to more clearly identify individual features behind selection into migration. Most of these are conventional background variables in sociological and demographic research. More specifically, the consensus now points to observable characteristics such as social background (Belot and Hatton 2012; Van Dalen and Henkens 2007; Dao et al. 2018), education (Chiquiar and Hanson 2002; Ichou 2014; J. Lee and Zhou 2015; Feliciano and Lanuza 2017; Bernard and Bell 2018; Van De Werfhorst and Heath 2019), social networks (Palloni et al. 2001), family types (Kulu and Milewski 2007), health outcomes (Kennedy et al. 2015; Riosmena et al. 2017; Ichou and Wallace 2019), and income (Dustmann and Kirchkamp 2002; Feliciano 2005; Van Dalen and Henkens 2007; Belot and Hatton 2012), among other individual characteristics that are often easy to measure and available in mainstream surveys or registers.

Starting from this conventional research on integration, new streams of academic inquiry are pushing our knowledge forward. This is particularly the case for two developments which we aim to incorporate into our paper.

The first development relates to an emerging field of empirical research which re-engaged with the seminal idea in migration theory that selection into migration is also mediated by certain characteristics that also explain the predisposition to migrate. This set of individual propensities are psychological or personal inner traits such as ambition, determination, or risk-taking propensity, which have long been assumed to systematically explain who migrates and who stays. Social scientists used a plethora of labels to refer to these soft traits. While economists may label this set of features "migrant quality," social psychologists refer to them as "personality traits", and sociologists prefer the term "individuality trait." Yet, the most descriptive and honest labels for these traits are likely Feliciano's "difficult-to-measure characteristics" (2020) and Cunha and Heckman's "non-cognitive productivity-enhancing traits" (Cunha and Heckman 2007). Previous research has identified that intentional migrants have higher levels of ambition (Cebolla-Boado and Soysal 2023) and openness to experience and extraversion than non-migrants (Akay et al. 2017). Research has also shown that personality

selection on migration varies by age and gender, with selection being stronger for women than men (Akay et al. 2017). Note, however, that not all relevant personality features accounting for selection into migration have a positive connotation. Almost a century ago pioneering studies on the mental health of immigrants identified their greater predisposition to suffer from certain conditions such as psychosis and other psychological and psychiatric conditions (Odegard 1932).

As robust and consistent indicators of unobservable traits—such as motivation, ambition and goal orientation—are not directly included in most large-scale data sources on labor market, their role in selectivity research remains understudied in migration analysis. Isolating inner individuality traits in empirical analyses is already a complex task, which explains why little research has gone beyond documenting whether selection on these hard-to-measure aspects of personality is consequential for integration. Indeed, most of the available research simply tries to document whether emigrants are different from non-movers in crucial inner traits, without exploring their role in shaping migrants' achievements in their destination country. In our case, we try to do so by identifying a setting in which migrants face adversity, namely unemployment, so that we can compare how they react and whether they deploy different intensity job-seeking strategies compared to their obvious majority comparison groups in origin and destination. Job-seeking intensity during periods of unemployment has emerged as a meaningful indicator of motivation, ambition, and labor market engagement. In David's (1974) foundational model, job search lies at the core of the migration process. Migrants positively selected on inner traits such as ambition or motivation are not only more likely to migrate but are also expected to engage more actively with the labor market once in the host country. Motivation, in particular, has been shown to be a strong predictor of labor market integration (Impicciatore and Molinari 2025). Yet, because unobservable traits like motivation and goal orientation are rarely included in large-scale labor market datasets, their role in migrant selectivity remains understudied. Most existing research simply asks whether migrants differ from non-movers in personality traits, without examining whether these traits shape their outcomes after migration.

Our study addresses this gap by identifying a setting in which migrants face adversity—unemployment—and by comparing their job-seeking behavior to that of majority groups in both origin and destination contexts. Job search intensity, as Bergemann et al. (2011) argue, reflects individuals' willingness to invest effort despite associated costs, and is positively associated with unobservable personality traits linked to ambition. Similarly, Basker (2018) shows that individuals with higher opportunity costs of unemployment tend to exert greater search effort, reinforcing its interpretive value as a proxy for motivation. Moreover, Constant et al. (2011) demonstrate that migrant groups with weaker attachment to the host country display lower job search effort, even when this is not compensated by lower reservation wages—further confirming that search intensity signals both labor market orientation and unobservable traits relevant to integration. This interpretation is supported by qualitative research showing that migrants actively develop strategies to respond to adversity, shaped by their aspirations, self-confidence, and long-term goals (Olli 2005). Thus, by focusing on job search behavior in response to unemployment, we are able to capture not only an aspect of labor market integration but also a concrete behavioral expression of the unobservable characteristics that shape migration decisions in the first place.

The second development is a significant advancement in the current research on migrant selectivity, as we focus on the factors that influence selection into various destinations. This area of study complements mainstream research on migrant selectivity, which, while crucial for understanding the differing experiences of migrant integration, is still relatively underdeveloped. Comparative evidence on migrant selectivity after migration has generally confirmed that migrants are generally selected (Bernard and Bell 2018, using IPUMS) but also that patterns of selection differ across countries (Polavieja et al., 2018 using ESS and WVS data), depending on factors such as fiscal pressure and welfare spending (Cebolla-Boado and Miyar-Busto 2019) and, most importantly, labor market characteristics such as different returns to skills in countries of destination (Ambrosini et al. 2015). While these are generally descriptive papers, few provide theoretical grounds for understanding differences in migrant selectivity. Indeed, some foundations for studying selection into different destinations are already in the push-pull factors debate. Countries with a higher return to human capital may benefit from more intense flows and more selected immigrants, as empirical literature shows is happening in the UK (Clark and Drinkwater 2014; D'angelo and Kofman 2017; IOM 2024). Similarly, seminal economic research on migrant selection has pointed to the importance of income inequality as an ecological determinant of selectivity (Borjas 1994). While this research is expanding, it mainly focuses on background characteristics and only rarely on unobserved personality traits. Comparative evidence regarding the latter is somewhat mixed (Polavieja et al. 2018) or negative (Cebolla-Boado and Soysal 2023).

ROMANIAN MIGRATION TO SPAIN AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

In recent decades Romania suffered from classic push factors (IOM 2019) including high levels of unemployment and poverty, particularly in rural areas; economic disparities between urban and rural areas; and low wages for workers to support families (Romania had one of the lowest average monthly salaries in the EU). This explains the large Romanian diaspora, which provides family connections to many Romanians in other EU countries.

Romanian migration to Western Europe has a long and complex history (Anghel et al. 2016). Prior to the 1990s, migration from Romania to Western Europe was limited due to the strict travel restrictions imposed by the communist regime. However, after the fall of communism in 1989, many Romanians began to seek opportunities abroad, particularly in Western Europe. In the early 1990s, many Romanians migrated to countries such as Germany and Italy to find work, often in low-skilled and manual labor positions. This initial wave of migration was largely driven by economic factors, as Romania was facing a difficult economic transition in the aftermath of communism.

Romanian migration to the EU was significant at the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially after the removal of the EU visa requirement in 2002 (Elrick and Ciobanu 2009). Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 further accelerated this migration to Western Europe (Anghel et al. 2016), primarily due to the lifting of labor mobility restrictions, which made it easier for Romanians to work and live in other EU countries, even though some restrictions remained in place until 2014. Emigration became a significant social and demographic dynamic for Romania. By the mid-2010s, around 17% of the total Romanian-born population resided in an OECD country, which made it the fifth-largest diaspora community worldwide (IOM 2019). Spain, the UK, Germany, France, and Italy quickly became key destinations, with Romanians emerging as one of the largest immigrant groups in Spain. Between 2005 and 2021, Romania consistently ranked among Spain's top three countries of origin for immigrants. The presence of a sizeable Romanian community encouraged additional migration, as social networks helped facilitate the arrival of newcomers (Elrick and Ciobanu 2009), with religious communities sometimes playing an important role in this process (Anghel et al. 2016). The Romanian-born population in Spain peaked in 2012, exceeding 750,000. However, return migration has increased since then (R. Anghel and Coşciug 2019), and temporary migration projects have become more popular among Romanians. Although the Romanian community in Spain has gradually declined since 2013, evidence shows significant turnover, with many Romanians both returning to and arriving in Spain each year. Factors such as established social networks, legal residency status, and geographic proximity likely contribute to this ongoing rotation within the Romanian migrant population.

In the UK, the population of Romanian origin grew significantly during the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, with a particularly notable increase in the mid-2010s. Around this time, the UK became the second most popular destination for Romanian migrants, following Germany (IOM 2019). According to estimates from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Romanian-born population in the UK increased significantly between 2014 and 2017, rising from 170,000 to 392,000. However, despite this rapid growth, the Romanian population in the UK was still much smaller than that of Spain, where it was approximately 50% larger during the same period. IOM data (2019) includes some features that reveal a more positive selection of Romanian migration to the UK than to Spain. Over a quarter of Romanian emigrants in the United Kingdom moved for a specific job offer—a proportion that is more than double that of Romanian migrants in Spain. Although only a small fraction (2%) of Romanians cited education as their primary motivation for migration, this rate was three times higher among those heading to the UK compared to Spain. The UK, along with Germany, Canada, and the United States, ranks as a top destination for highly educated Romanian emigrants, with the UK alone hosting 10% of Romania's highly skilled diaspora.

The comparison between Spain and the United Kingdom is analytically relevant due to crucial differences in their labor markets. Romanian migrants in both the UK and Spain primarily cite economic reasons for their migration; however, labor-focused migration projects are more prevalent among Romanians in the UK than in Spain (IOM 2019). In the case of Spain, many Romanians were attracted by the country's construction boom in the early 2000s, which created demand for low-skilled labor (Rodríguez 2022). In the United Kingdom, many Romanians were similarly drawn by the availability of jobs in construction, but also in sectors such as hospitality and healthcare (Migration Observatory 2014).

Probably the most important distinction between these two destination countries for the focus of our paper is the varying returns to human capital in each country, with Spain being below the EU average in 2020 and the UK being clearly above it (European Commission 2019). According to the OECD, in 2019, the earnings premium associated with completing tertiary education (all post-secondary education) compared to completing upper

secondary education (i.e., high school or equivalent) was around 46% for men and 52% for women in Spain, while it was 80% for men and 73% for women in the UK. This suggests that, on average, the returns to higher education are higher in the UK than in Spain.

The Spanish and British labor markets are very different due to their distinct productive systems, which could explain the extent to which a national migrant flow can differ. Spain has a much higher unemployment rate than the UK, with the unemployment rate in Spain being around 15% as of 2021, while in the UK it was around 4% (source: Eurostat). The UK has more flexible employment laws and regulations, giving employers greater freedom to hire and fire workers. In contrast, Spain has more rigid labor laws, which can make it more difficult for employers to adapt to changing economic conditions. Furthermore, the UK's financial and insurance sector contributed 7.1% of its GDP in 2019, while tourism (14.6%) was among the largest sectors in Spain's economy in the same year (source: Eurostat). Construction, one of the main sectors attracting migrants in both destinations, represented around 6.5% of GDP in both countries. These differences are significant in terms of the ability of the countries to attract the most talented migrants to their respective labor markets.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESES

Together with documenting patterns of selection based on observable and conventional background characteristics among Romanian emigrants, this paper focuses on examining how these individuals respond to unemployment. Unemployment constitutes a significant barrier to migrant integration and, consequently, to the overall success of migration trajectories. We argue that individuals' responses to unemployment are likely correlated with unobservable traits that, if implicated in migrant selectivity, could substantially influence their labor market outcomes.

Specifically, we analyze how respondents react to losing their jobs across different countries and migrant statuses. This approach allows us to assess whether emigrants exhibit greater persistence or determination in overcoming unemployment compared to non-migrants (both at origin and in destination countries) and whether these patterns vary by destination. If migrants are positively selected on latent personal attributes that facilitate resilience in the face of unemployment, we would expect them to engage in more intensive job search behaviors than their non-migrant counterparts in similar contexts. For comprehensiveness, we also include comparisons with non-movers in the country of origin.

To make these comparisons possible, we construct a job search intensity index as an indicator of motivation that is both informative of individual strategies and comparable across countries (see data section for detailed explanations). This represents an innovative approach in how to study unobservable traits indirectly, compared to traditional analyses comparing migrant-native scores in standard survey questions on ambition, risk aversion, optimism, and specific life cycle expectations. Our approach allows us to explore the selection patterns of Romanian migration in Spain and the United Kingdom and its implications for labor market resilience.

In sum, we address two separate research questions:

1. How does migrant selection from Romania vary by destination (Spain vs. the UK) regarding observable characteristics such as education?
2. When unemployed, does job search intensity vary by migrant status and destination country, and how does it differ from that of non-movers in Romania?

While our primary focus is on job-seeking behaviors, we conceptualize these actions as a concrete manifestation of one of the latent dimensions of labor market resilience. Specifically, the intensity and persistence of job search during unemployment serve as observable indicators of individuals' underlying capacity to adapt and persevere in the face of labor market adversity. Thus, our analysis of job search strategies provides insight into the unobservable traits that may underpin successful migrant integration (McLarnon et al., 2023).

Building on our research questions, we articulate the following hypotheses to guide our empirical analysis:

H1: Migrants, especially those in destinations where positive selection on observable traits is pronounced (the UK), will display greater intensity and persistence in job search activities during unemployment than both non-migrants in Romania and native-born workers in the host countries. We interpret these job-seeking behaviors as observable indicators of a latent dimension of labor market resilience, capturing individuals' capacity to adapt and persevere in the face of labor market adversity.

H2: The differences in job search intensity and persistence will be most pronounced when comparing Romanian migrants in the UK (high positive selection) to those in Spain (lower positive selection), and to

non-migrants at origin, thus providing a nuanced understanding of how both observable and unobservable selection factors shape labor market integration.

DATA AND VARIABLES

In order to conduct a comprehensive analysis into the patterns and consequences of migrant selection, we utilized a multi-sited data approach. Our primary datasets are sourced from the national Labour Force Surveys from Spain and Britain, and the European Labour Force Survey from Romania. The period of analysis spans from 2000 to 2017. Significantly, the datasets are collected on a trimestral basis, resulting in four data points per year. With 18 years of data, spanning multiple economic cycles, this dataset provides a robust longitudinal perspective on the migration patterns and characteristics of Romanians in Spain and the UK.

The sample includes Romanian-born individuals residing in Spain and the UK. To facilitate comparisons with the native population and considering the large size of the native populations in these countries, a representative sample of 10% of each country's native population has been randomly selected from the dataset. The unified dataset consists of a total sample of 1,089,853 individuals across the three countries (Spain: 579,196; Romania: 164,277; UK: 346,380).

To ensure comparability and coherence across the three data sources, we implemented several recoding and harmonizing procedures. We recoded categories both over time and across different countries. Since the three labor force surveys had categorized some variables differently, we conducted a thorough recoding process. Additionally, within a single country, the categorization of certain variables had also changed throughout the studied period. As a result, we had to adopt broader categorizations in some cases to facilitate the harmonization and integration of the three datasets.

The unified dataset used in this study offers a comprehensive array of variables, enabling a nuanced analysis of job search behaviors among unemployed individuals. Central to our approach is the construction of a dependent variable that captures the intensity of job-seeking efforts. This variable is designed as an index ranging from 0 to 1, effectively normalizing the information regarding the number of job-seeking methods used by each respondent. In doing so, it not only reflects the breadth of strategies deployed but also accounts for the relative intensity and prevalence of each method within the specific context of each country. To develop this measure, we first recorded whether individuals engaged in up to ten distinct job search strategies, such as contacting employment offices, registering with job banks, reaching out to employers, leveraging social networks, and publishing announcements. Recognizing that not all methods are equally available or relevant across countries (see Figure A.1), we excluded those not present in certain national contexts to maintain methodological consistency. Crucially, the index does not simply tally the number of methods used. Instead, it incorporates a country-year normalization process. For each job search method and within each country-year, we calculated the average usage rate. This step controls for institutional, policy, and cultural differences that could otherwise confound direct comparisons. Each individual's use of a given method is then divided by the corresponding country-year average, yielding a relative intensity score for that action. Summing these relative scores across all relevant methods produces a composite index that reflects both the diversity and the contextual intensity of job search behaviors. Finally, the composite index is normalized to a 0–1 scale (See Figure A.2), facilitating straightforward interpretation and direct comparison across countries and groups. This approach ensures that our measure of job search intensity is not biased by structural or institutional differences between national labor markets. Instead, it provides a robust, context-sensitive indicator of individual-level variation in job-seeking effort, allowing us to draw meaningful and fair comparisons between groups and across countries.

The dataset provides detailed demographic and personal information, including country of residence, year and trimester of the survey, whether nationality matches country of residence, country of birth, and gender. These variables are consistently available across all three countries and are categorized into five-year age groups. The dataset also records the province or region of residence for each country; however, it is important to note that regional categorizations may differ by country. Educational attainment is also included for all countries, though due to the recoding process, the final classification only indicates whether individuals have completed tertiary studies or not. Notably, information on whether individuals are engaged in regulated studies is not available, which requires careful harmonization across countries to ensure comparability. For Spain and the UK, the dataset includes the age at which studies are completed, but this detail is missing for Romania. Migration-related variables offer insights into immigrants' duration of residence in the host country, categorized annually and in five-year intervals for those residing in the country for over ten years. The dataset further contains extensive labor market information, identifying individuals' employment status as employed, inactive,

or unemployed. There is a unique employment status category for military service, available only for Romania. Additional variables detail the length of unemployment, time since last employment (with categories ranging from less than three months to over five years), type of work schedule (full-time or part-time), and whether individuals receive employment-related benefits.

METHODS

To test our hypotheses, which examine the job search intensity among unemployed individuals, we employ a two-stage Heckman selection model. This approach is necessary due to the potential selection bias in focusing solely on the unemployed population. By modelling the process that leads individuals into unemployment, we account for the non-random nature of this group. Following this selection correction, we analyse variations in job search intensity across different groups, allowing us to test whether Romanian migrants exhibit greater persistence and intensity in their job search efforts during prolonged periods of unemployment and under challenging regional labor market conditions (high unemployment levels by region). The Heckman selection model is applied with robust standard errors clustered at the regional level to account for possible correlations within regions. This allows us to capture unobserved heterogeneity across regions that may affect both the likelihood of being unemployed and the intensity of job search activities.

The Heckman selection model consists of two stages:

1. Selection Equation (*Probit Model for Unemployment Status*):

$$Z_{ij}^* = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \text{Sample}_{ij} + \gamma_2 X_{ij} + v_{ij} \quad (2)$$

where Z_{ij}^* is the latent variable for the likelihood of individual i in region j being unemployed. γ_0 is the intercept and v_{ij} is the error term for the selection equation, assumed to follow a normal distribution.

2. Outcome Equation (*Linear Regression for Job Search Intensity*):

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Sample}_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{U_Duration}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Sample}_{ij} \times \text{U_Duration}_{ij} + \lambda_1 \text{IMR}_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (3)$$

where Y_{ij} is the Job search intensity for unemployed individual i in region j ; β_0 is the intercept. IMR_{ij} is the inverse mills ratio from the first-stage selection equation to correct for selection bias and ε_{ij} is the error term for the outcome equation. By including the inverse mills ratio (from the selection equation), this model adjusts for potential selection bias, allowing for a more accurate estimation of the factors influencing job search intensity.

Robust standard errors clustered at the regional level are applied to correct for intra-regional correlations, thereby enhancing the reliability of our estimates.

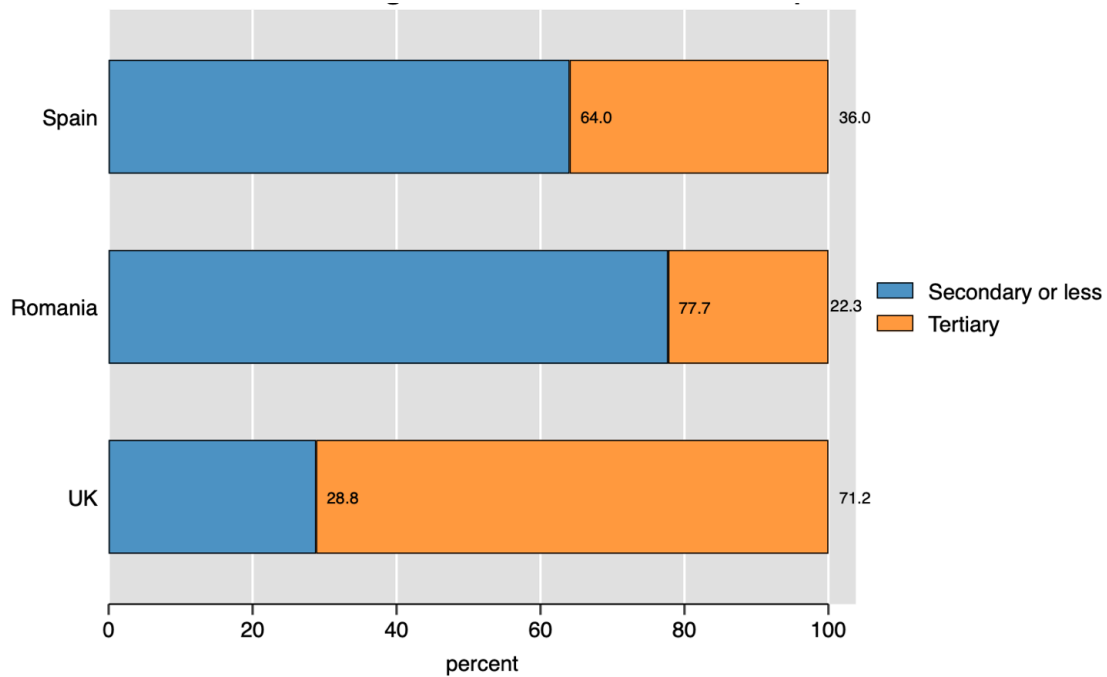
By employing these two methods, we aim to provide a comprehensive examination of our hypotheses and gain a deeper understanding of the impact of migrant quality on labor market outcomes.

RESULTS

Positive selection on observable variables, stronger to the UK than to Spain:

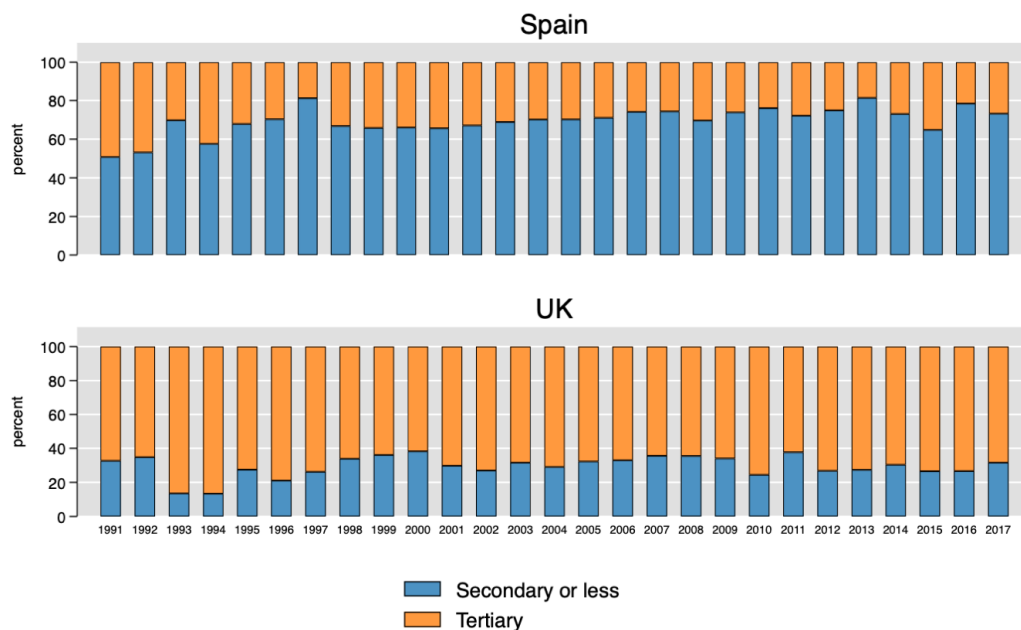
Our empirical analysis provides clear evidence of positive selection on observable characteristics—most notably, educational attainment—among Romanian migrants, with this selection being markedly stronger for those migrating to the United Kingdom than to Spain.

The analysis reveals that Romanian migrants in both Spain and the UK are significantly more likely to hold tertiary degrees compared to those who remain in Romania (Figure 1). However, the extent of this positive selection differs substantially by destination. Romanian migrant tertiary graduates are highly overrepresented in the UK. On average, 71.2% of Romanians residing in the UK possess a tertiary degree, compared to only 22.3% among those remaining in Romania. This means that the proportion of tertiary-educated Romanians in the UK is more than three times higher than in the origin country. In Spain, positive selection is also evident, but less pronounced. Tertiary graduates account for 36% of Romanians in Spain, a figure that, while higher than the Romanian average, is only about one-third greater than among non-migrants.

Figure 1. Educational level of Romanians in Romania, Spain, and the UK, average 2000–2017

Source: Authors' elaboration with LFS unified dataset.

This pattern of educational selectivity has been consistent over time (Figure 2). In the UK, the proportion of Romanian tertiary graduates among migrants has sometimes exceeded 80%, while in Spain, the share has gradually declined, approaching the Romanian average in recent years.

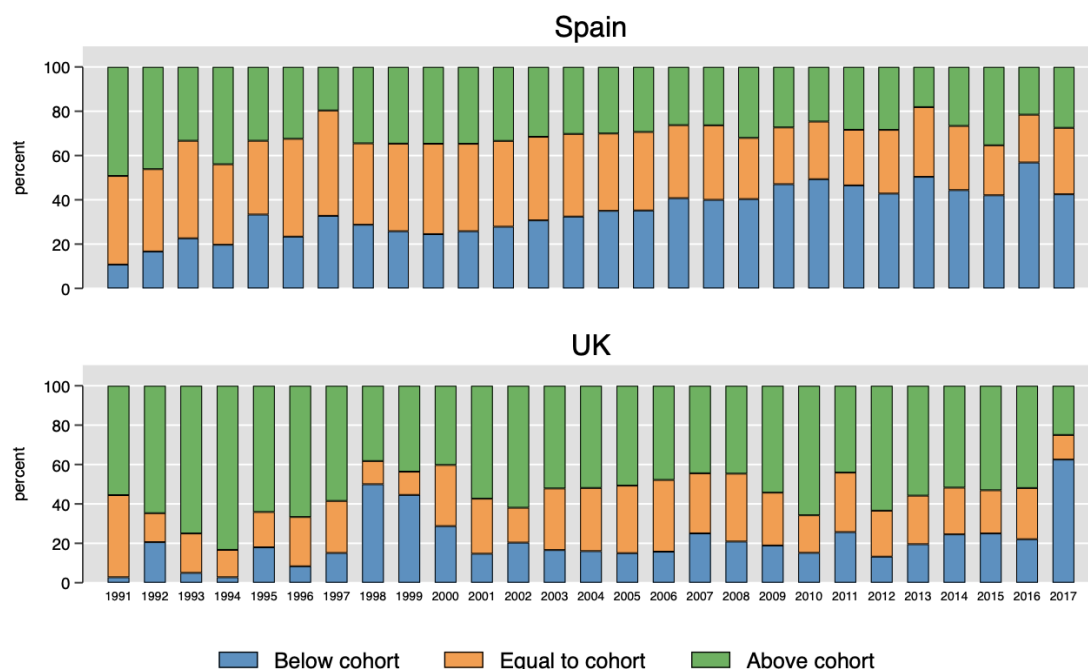
Figure 2. Educational level of Romanians in Spain and the UK, 2000–2017

Source: Authors' elaboration with LFS unified dataset.

To further contextualize the magnitude of positive selection, we compare the educational attainment of recent Romanian migrants to Spain and the UK with that of their peers who remain in Romania, using a relative

measure (Figure 3). In the UK, up to 50% of recently arrived Romanian migrants each year have more years of education than their cohort in Romania. In contrast, in Spain, this figure is around 25%, indicating a weaker but still significant positive selection effect.

Figure 3. Educational level of Romanians in Spain and the UK compared to the same cohort living in Romania, 2000–2017



Source: Authors' elaboration with LFS unified dataset.

This pattern remains consistent throughout the analyzed period, with only occasional statistical anomalies in specific years. The annual comparison shows that Romanian migrants in the UK systematically exhibit a much greater relative educational advantage compared to those who stay in their country of origin, while in Spain, this advantage is more modest and, in recent years, tends to approach the levels observed in Romania.

These results confirm the existence of robust positive selection in terms of education among Romanian migrants, especially toward the UK. This finding aligns with theoretical expectations and previous literature, which suggest that countries with higher returns to education and more selective labor markets, such as the UK, tend to attract the most highly qualified migrants. Moreover, the persistence of this pattern over time reinforces the idea that educational selectivity is not a temporary phenomenon, but a structural feature of Romanian migration to the UK.

The relevance of these findings is further underscored when considering their implications for labor markets and social integration. The overrepresentation of tertiary-educated individuals among Romanians in the UK suggests a potential for faster and more upward labor market integration, although it may also reflect self-selection based on expectations of higher economic and professional returns. Conversely, the flow to Spain, while showing positive selection, reveals a more limited capacity to attract highly qualified talent, resulting in a migrant composition less differentiated from the origin country.

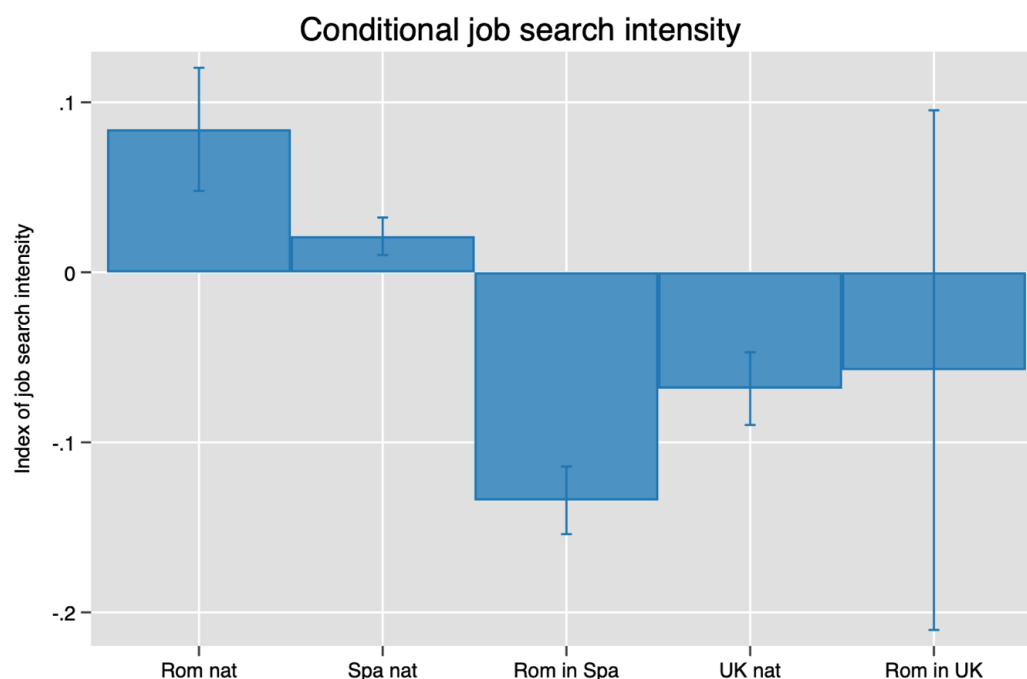
Finally, these findings highlight the importance of considering destination-specific factors—such as labor market structure, immigration policies, and returns to education—to understand migrant selectivity patterns. They also open avenues for future research to explore how this educational selectivity translates into differentiated labor market trajectories, and whether additional variations exist by gender, age cohort, or sector of employment.

Positive selection on job search intensity when unemployed, stronger to the UK than to Spain:

Our empirical analysis offers a nuanced perspective on job search intensity among Romanian migrants in Spain and the United Kingdom, highlighting the complex relationship between selection on observable and unobservable traits. While our findings confirm robust positive selection on observable traits—specifically, education—particularly toward the UK, this does not necessarily translate into positive selection on unobservable traits, at least as captured by our measure of job search intensity. This distinction is central to our contribution: the presence of observable selection does not automatically imply that migrants are also selected for greater proactive labor market engagement.

The standardized index of job search intensity, constructed for cross-national comparability, shows that Romanian migrants in Spain consistently exhibit the lowest levels of job search intensity among all of the groups analyzed (Figure 4). This group lags behind not only their compatriots in the UK but also non-migrants in Romania and native-born populations in both Spain and the UK. The gap is especially pronounced in the early stages of unemployment, when active job search is most critical for reintegration.

Figure 4. Job search intensity estimation, Heckman model



Source: Author's elaboration with LFS unified dataset. Results obtained from Table A.1 in the Appendix.

In contrast, Romanian migrants in the UK display job search behaviors broadly comparable to those of UK natives. Their average index values indicate a greater breadth and persistence in job-seeking strategies than those observed among Romanians in Spain, but without clear evidence of a “hyper-selection” effect or a distinct advantage over the local population. Romanians who remain in their country of origin occupy an intermediate position, with job search intensity higher than that of migrants in Spain but generally below UK levels.

At this point, the discussion must return explicitly to the hypotheses that guided our analysis. We set out to test whether Romanian migrants exhibit positive selection not only on observable traits—such as educational attainment—but also on unobservable dimensions, operationalized here as job search intensity during unemployment. Our results so far have confirmed a robust positive selection on education, with this effect being much stronger for migration to the United Kingdom than to Spain. However, the expectation, which posited that positive selection on unobservable traits (proxied here by job search intensity) would mirror the pattern observed for education, is not supported by the data. In other words, positive educational selection does not consistently translate into higher job search intensity or persistence during unemployment. Specifically, Romanian migrants in Spain exhibit the lowest levels of job search intensity among all groups analyzed, including non-migrants in Romania and natives in both destination countries. In contrast, Romanian migrants in the UK display job search behaviors broadly comparable to those of UK natives but which do not surpass them.

Thus, although positive selection on observable traits is evident and destination-specific, it does not necessarily imply a corresponding selection on the unobservable dimension of labor market resilience—at least as captured by job search intensity. The data reveal that destination context and structural factors may play a more decisive role in shaping job search behaviors than unobservable individual traits presumed at the point of migration. The lack of systematic evidence for higher job search intensity among migrants in highly selective destinations calls for a reconsideration of relatively common assumptions in the migration literature. The expectation that positive selection on observable characteristics will be mirrored by unobservable attributes such as labor market resilience or persistence may be overstated.

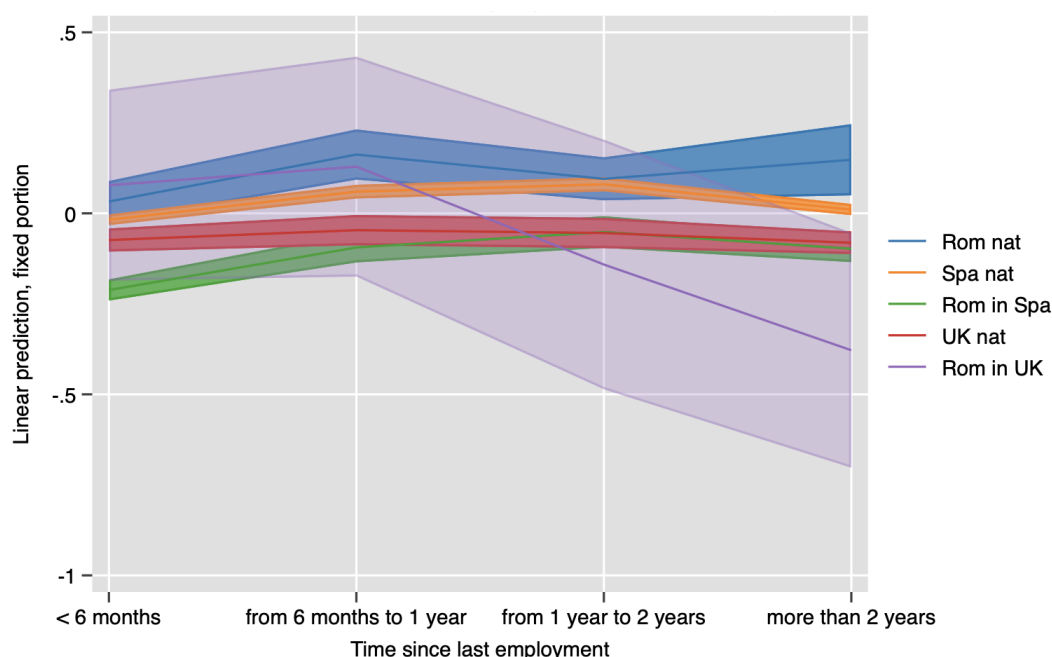
Robustness Check: Job Search Intensity by Duration of Unemployment

To ensure that the differences in job search intensity observed in Figure 4 are not simply a byproduct of variation in the duration of unemployment across countries—particularly the longer average unemployment spells in Spain—we conduct a robustness check by analyzing job search intensity as a function of time since last employment. This approach allows us to disentangle whether the lower job search intensity among Romanian migrants in Spain is genuinely a group effect or merely reflects the fact that individuals in Spain tend to experience longer periods of unemployment, which could naturally lead to reduced search effort over time.

Figure 5 presents mean job search intensity by time since last employment for all groups in the analysis, with confidence intervals around each estimate. By disaggregating job search intensity according to the duration of unemployment, we can observe whether the patterns identified in the main analysis (Figure 4) persist across different unemployment spells, or whether they are driven by compositional differences in unemployment duration. The analysis distinguishes between several intervals: less than 6 months, 6 months to 1 year, 1 to 2 years, and more than 2 years since last employment. For each group—Romanian migrants in Spain and the UK, non-migrants in Romania, and natives in both destination countries—we estimate the average job search intensity within each unemployment duration category.

The results confirm that the pattern of lower job search intensity among Romanian migrants in Spain is robust when controlling for unemployment duration. Across all intervals, this group consistently exhibits the lowest levels of job search intensity, regardless of whether individuals have been unemployed for a short or long period. In contrast, Romanian migrants in the UK maintain relatively stable and higher levels of job search intensity throughout the unemployment spell, closely mirroring the behavior of UK natives.

Figure 5. Job search intensity by time in unemployment. Heckman model estimates



Source: Authors' elaboration with LFS unified dataset. Results obtained from Table A.1 in the Appendix.

This rules out the possibility that the lower job search intensity among Romanian migrants in Spain is simply due to longer unemployment spells, which could naturally reduce search activity. These results reinforce the interpretation that destination context and group-specific factors, rather than unemployment duration, are the primary drivers of the observed disparities in job search behavior.

All this adds credibility to the main conclusion: positive selection on observable traits does not necessarily translate into greater resilience or proactive job search among migrants, and the Spanish context in particular appears to dampen such behaviors, independently of how long individuals have been unemployed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to address two key dimensions of migrant selectivity. The first one is basically descriptive: whether Romanian migrants to Spain and the UK are positively selected on observable characteristics. The second one implies more analytical ambition: whether this selection extends to unobservable traits, operationalized as job search intensity during unemployment. The empirical evidence provides a clear and consistent answer to the first empirical question: Romanian migrants, particularly those moving to the UK, are strongly positively selected on education. The proportion of tertiary graduates among Romanians in the UK far exceeds that of both non-migrants in Romania and those migrating to Spain, confirming a robust pattern of educational selectivity toward destinations with higher returns to human capital (Chiquiar and Hanson 2002; Ichou 2014; Clark and Drinkwater 2014; D'Angelo and Kofman 2017).

However, the answer to the second question is less straightforward. Specifically, our results challenge the assumption—often implicit in migration research—that observable and unobservable selection are inherently linked (Feliciano 2005; Feliciano 2020; Cebolla-Boado and Soysal 2023), and that not only is this linkage not automatic, but it may be absent or even reversed in certain contexts. The analysis reveals that positive selection on observable traits does not necessarily translate into positive selection on unobservable dimensions such as proactive labor market engagement. Romanian migrants in Spain exhibit the lowest job search intensity among all groups, and even in the UK, migrants do not surpass natives in this regard. In our analysis, we emphasize that job search intensity during unemployment is a particularly valuable indicator—one that, despite its limitations, offers meaningful insight into the labor market resilience and preparedness for success that are often assumed to characterize migrant populations (David 1974; Bergemann et al. 2011; Constant et al. 2011; Basker 2018). While job search intensity does not capture the full complexity of non-cognitive traits, it nonetheless reflects a proactive orientation and adaptive effort in the face of labor market adversity. This behavioral measure serves as a concrete, observable manifestation of the underlying resilience and determination that much of the migration literature presupposes but rarely measures directly. By focusing on job search intensity, we provide an empirical window into the latent qualities that may facilitate successful integration and upward mobility among migrants. We recognize, however, that this indicator is not exhaustive: structural constraints, institutional contexts, and individual circumstances all shape job-seeking behaviors. Still, within these boundaries, job search intensity remains a robust and policy-relevant proxy for the resilience and readiness to overcome challenges that are frequently attributed to migrants in both academic and policy debates.

This insight has at least two clear academic implications. Firstly, it calls for greater caution in inferring the presence and consequences of unobservable selection from observable patterns alone. Researchers should avoid assuming that migrants who are more educated have more motivation or are more proactive, unless this is empirically demonstrated. The study thus invites a re-examination of the conceptual foundations of migrant selectivity and encourages the use of research designs that can directly or indirectly test for the existence and consequences of unobservable traits (Cunha and Heckman 2007; Feliciano 2020). Secondly, our findings highlight the need for migration scholars to develop and employ research designs that allow for the identification, even if only by implication, of unobservable selection and its consequences. Future work should seek to replicate these analyses in other national contexts and with other migrant groups to determine whether the patterns observed here are unique to Romanian migration to Spain and the UK, or whether they reflect broader dynamics in international migration. Comparative studies, longitudinal data, and innovative measurement strategies will be crucial for advancing our understanding of how observable and unobservable selection interact to shape migrant outcomes.

From a policy perspective, these findings underscore the importance of tailoring integration and labor market support policies to the actual characteristics and behaviors of migrant groups, rather than relying on generalized assumptions about their resilience or adaptability. In contexts like Spain, where Romanian migrants demonstrate low job search intensity, targeted interventions may be needed to encourage more active labor market engagement and to address potential barriers—structural, institutional, or informational—that limit

proactive job seeking. Moreover, the evidence suggests that policies aimed solely at attracting highly educated migrants may not be sufficient to ensure successful labor market integration if unobservable traits such as resilience are not also present or fostered. Policymakers should consider multifaceted approaches that support both the development of human capital and the cultivation of adaptive, proactive behaviors among migrants.

Finally, several limitations should be acknowledged. Structural and institutional factors in destination countries—such as labor market regulations, unemployment benefits, or cultural norms—may also influence job search behaviors, potentially confounding the relationship between selection and observed outcomes. Additionally, the analysis is limited to Romanian migrants in Spain and the UK, and caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings to other contexts or migrant populations. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating richer measures of unobservable traits and by extending the comparative scope of analysis.

The operationalization of unobservable traits via job search intensity, while grounded in scholarship, may not capture the full range of relevant non-cognitive characteristics. In our analysis, we use job search intensity during unemployment as a practical, though partial, indicator of the labor market resilience and readiness for success often attributed to migrants. By focusing on Romanian migrants in the UK and Spain, we directly test whether assumptions about resilience and proactive labor market engagement hold across destination contexts. While job search intensity does not capture all aspects of non-cognitive traits, it reflects a concrete, observable form of adaptability and effort in the face of labor market adversity. Our findings show that the relationship between observable and unobservable selection is neither automatic nor uniform—significant differences emerge between these groups. We acknowledge that job search intensity is influenced by structural, institutional, and individual factors and is not an exhaustive measure of resilience. Nevertheless, it remains a robust and policy-relevant proxy for the adaptive capacities often presumed in migration research, providing a critical empirical test of widely held assumptions about migrant selectivity in different contexts.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors of this article declare that they have no financial, professional or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

Authorship contribution statement

Héctor Cebolla-Boado: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

María Miyar-Busto: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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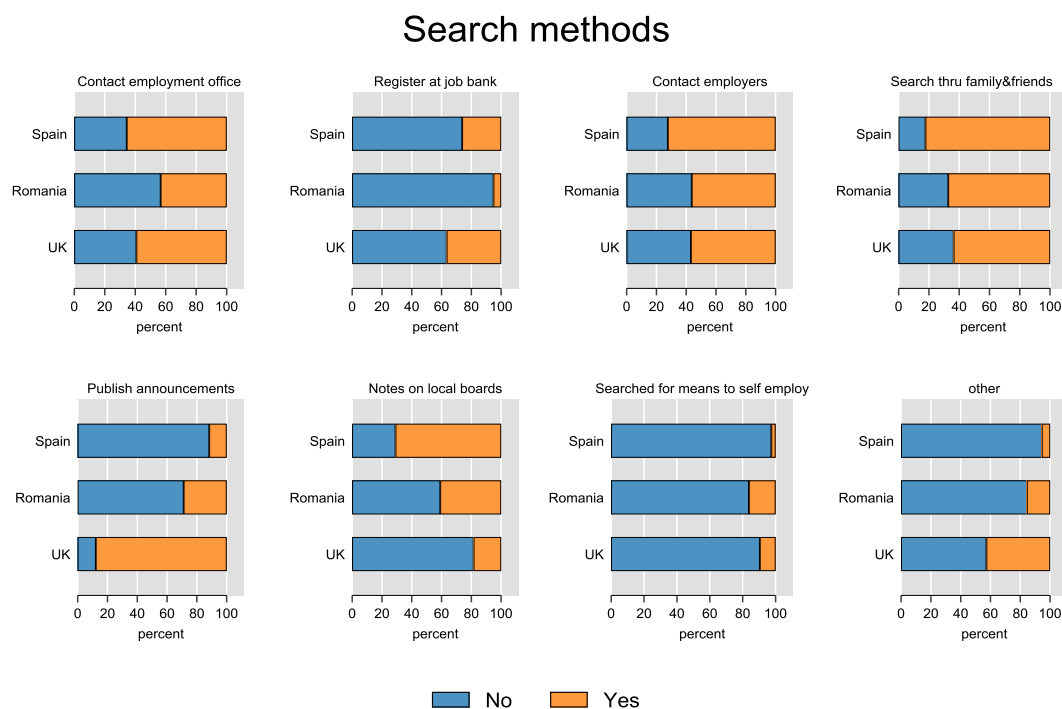
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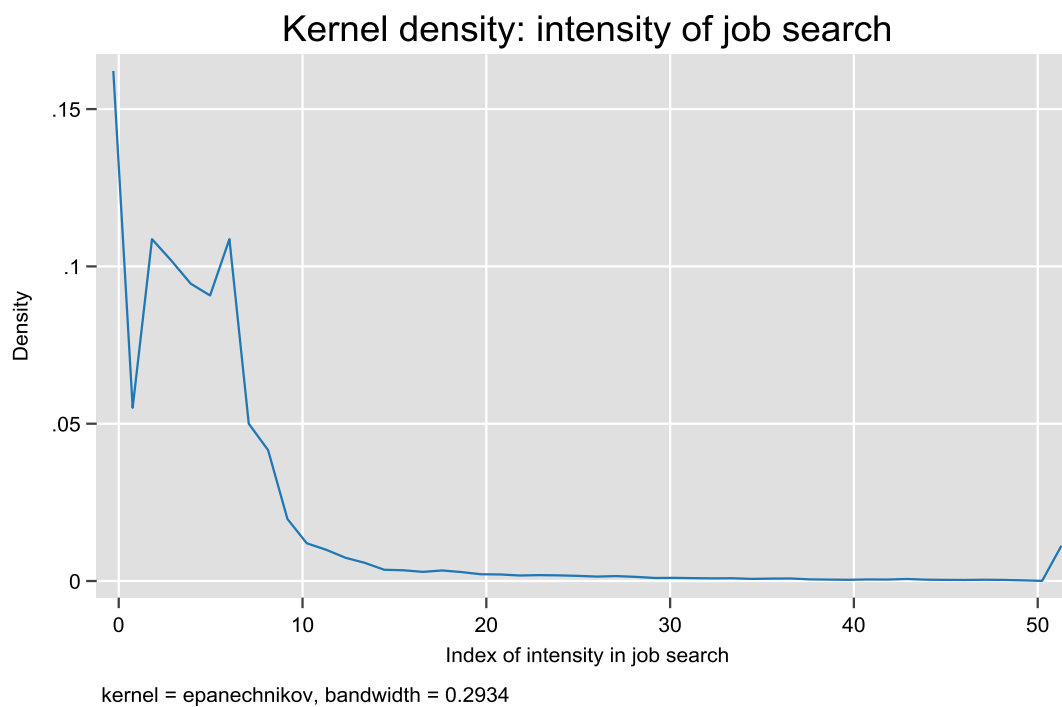
APPENDIX

Figure A.1. Search methods



Source: Author's elaboration with LFS unified dataset.

Figure A.2. Kernel density, intensity of job search index



Source: Author's elaboration with LFS unified dataset.

Table A.1. Selection models (depvar: job search intensity)

		(1)	(2)	(3)
Group	Spa nat	-0.05**	-0.09***	-0.08*
(ref.: Rom natives)		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)
	Rom in Spa	-0.20***	-0.24***	-0.26***
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)
	UK nat	-0.17***	-0.18***	-0.13***
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)
	Rom in UK	-0.15*	-0.22***	-0.09
		(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.11)
Regional unemployment			0.25***	0.24***
			(0.05)	(0.05)
Educ (ref: secondary or les)	Tertiary		0.16***	0.16***
			(0.01)	(0.01)
Age			-0.00***	-0.00***
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Female			-0.08***	-0.08***
			(0.01)	(0.01)
Time in unemp (ref: < 6 months)	from 6 months to 1 year		0.08***	0.13**
			(0.01)	(0.04)
	from 1 year to 2 years		0.09***	0.07
			(0.01)	(0.04)
	more an 2 years		0.03***	0.12*
			(0.01)	(0.06)
Groups*time in unempl.	SpaNat*6m-1yr			-0.05
				(0.05)
	SpaNat*1-2yrs			0.03
				(0.04)
	SpaNat*2yrs			-0.09
				(0.06)
	RomSpa*6m-1yr			-0.02
				(0.05)
	RomSpa*1-2yrs			0.09*
				(0.05)
	RomSpa*2yrs			-0.01
				(0.06)
	UKNat*6m-1yr			-0.10*
				(0.05)
	UKNat*1-2yr			-0.04
				(0.05)
	UKNat*2yrs			-0.13*
				(0.06)
	RomUK*6m-1yr			-0.01
				(0.18)
	RomUK*1-2yr			-0.26
				(0.18)
	RomUK*2yrs			-0.37*
				(0.18)
Constant	0.08***	0.08***	0.06**	0.04
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)
Sample	N	104505	104505	104505
	Region	46	46	46
	Region-year	839	839	839

Selection equation omitted from results.