

THROUGH AND BEYOND BREXIT – AS EXPERIENCED BY THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA IN THE UK

Candidate: ANDRADA-MARIA PETRACHE

Coordinator: Prof. CEZAR BIRZEA, PhD

ABSTRACT

This research sets out to analyse the citizens' rights dimension of the Brexit process by going beyond literature analysis and looking at its implications on the Romanian community in the UK. The Romanian diaspora constitutes a perfect subject for a case study, as during the first year of the negotiations, Romanians became the second non-British nationality in the UK, overpassing the Irish and fastly approaching the Polish, only to become the largest EU group applying for the Settlement Scheme by the end of the process, with over 1 million Romanians registered in the UK, according to 2022 statistics¹.

More precisely, the research aims to describe and analyse how the process of putting an end to the EU internal mobility and bringing citizens' rights under negotiation affected the Romanian citizens who have made the UK their home. In this endeavour, the paper uses a cross-method type of analysis, ranging from literature and legal documents analysis, to interviews and questionnaires and combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, analysing the facts and findings in the constructivist paradigm. It seeks to see if, how and to which extent has Brexit affected the Romanian diaspora in the UK.

The study is therefore structured into two main parts, the theoretical framework and the case study of the Romanian diaspora's everyday life and migration under the Brexit negotiations and the Withdrawal Agreement. The first one seeks to paint the frame for the second, starting from an explanation of the constructivist paradigm and a discussion on identities and multiculturalism, two essential aspects for diasporas. It then moves on to discuss migration and

¹ Home Office, "Official Statistics EU Settlement Scheme quarterly statistics", gov.uk, June 2022

diasporas, zooming in on the traits of the Romanian diaspora in the UK. Finally, the theoretical framework seeks to describe Brexit and its implications on citizens' rights, providing context, a timeline of negotiations, as well as details on temporary and future arrangements for EU citizens living in the UK.

As this paper analysed an ongoing, unprecedented process, the first departure of an EU member state, the literature was rather limited, no less because the events and contexts were ever-changing, as demonstrated by the Brexit timeline in Chapter III. Therefore, from a methodological point of view, the paper begins with a literature review and document analysis, seeking to describe the theoretical concepts such as collective identities, multiculturalism, migration, as well as to define the case study: painting a portrait of the Romanian diaspora in the UK, discussing Brexit as it has unfolded, as well as citizens' rights and post-Brexit migration arrangements.

Having provided the framework of analysis and introduced all concepts that are to be relevant in either conducting or interpreting the results of the empirical study, the research moves into data analysis, as I discuss quantitative and qualitative data. To collect the empirical data, I applied a questionnaire on understanding the influence Brexit has had on the Romanian community in the UK three times, in three consecutive years: 2018, 2019, 2020. This was a survey with closed-ended questions, which I analysed quantitatively. One year later, in 2021, I applied another questionnaire, this time with open-ended questions, to seek explanations for Romanian migrants' experience and status in the UK in the context of Brexit and provide context and explanations for the quantitative results.

A descriptive study, this paper seeks to answer the main research question of *What was the Romanian diaspora's in the UK experience of Brexit?*. To do so, it looks to address more specific questions, such as: Was the Romanian diaspora in the UK worried by Brexit? Were they affected by it? And if yes, how? How well-integrated are they in the British society? How do they identify and describe themselves? Have they experienced any discrimination? These questions were addressed as part of the questionnaires, first with a generous sample of 277 (2018), 557 (2019) and 278 (2020) respondents who have volunteered to fill in the online questionnaire disseminated through Romanian diaspora in the UK Facebook groups and then

with a less statistically significant one in 2020, yet very relevant for offering explanations and context for the answers received in the previous years.

Questions of identity and socially constructed representations of the world have been very relevant when drawing the final conclusions and interpreting the results, as constructivism served as the paradigm of analysis for this research and the paper sought to understand how the Romanian diaspora in the UK experienced Brexit, “both of a social construction of meaning (including knowledge), and of the construction of social reality”², since they all had to go through a process of social learning in order to adapt to their new status and identity.

Their sense of identity throughout and after the process was a key element for a study under the constructivist lenses, starting from the premise that their identities were under constant adaptation during the Brexit negotiations, as they are “made, not given”³ and under permanent construction depending on the relation with the social and political context (their new status and rights).

Tightly linked to their experience and sense of identity, the paper also looks at the Romanian diaspora’s “understandings and expectations about self”⁴ (whether European, British, Romanian or related to other professional or geographical subgroups), transnationalism⁵ and at how their different given (obtained at birth) or acquired (adoptive, with migration) identities coexist. These aspects are all essential for a constructivist analysis of their experience of Brexit as a process affecting their social and political reality and status, as well as their personal sense of identity and future perspectives.

It finds that the experience of Brexit has predominantly been a positive one for the Romanians in the UK, who only experienced very few and limited accounts of discrimination, and managed to adapt to their new post-Brexit status gradually and effectively, while remaining overall optimisting throughout the negotiation process. Furthermore, there were only limited

² Stefano Guzzini, *Power, Realism and Constructivism*, Routledge, 2013, p. 191

³ Maja Zehfuss, “Constructivism and Identity - A dangerous liaison*” In *Constructivism and International Relations - Alexander Wendt and his critics*, by Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander, Routledge, 2006, p. 96

⁴ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics”, *International Organization (MIT Press)*, Vol. 46, No. 2, Spring, 1992, p. 397

⁵ See Dumitru Sandu, *Lumile sociale ale migrației românești în străinătate*, Polirom, 2010, p. 146

difficulties and challenges, but sufficient satisfaction with the reassurance mechanisms put in place by the British authorities, as well as with the rights granted through the Settlement Scheme.