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Diaspora Diplomacy and Modes of Engagement. The case of the Romanian Diaspora in the UK

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Abstract

Purpose The current study aims to map the existent modes of engagement used by both individual and organisational actors of Romanian diaspora community in UK in order to build public legitimacy and social value in the host society. Our study focuses on two main questions: 1) what are the forms of engagement by which diaspora members enact their role as diplomats for ethnic diaspora communities? 2) what is the role of communication practices, specifically of PR?

Design / Methodology Our study is based on an analysis of online public documents extracted from different websites, blogs and public social media accounts, complemented by primary data. The research design is a multi-levelled case study.

Findings The main finding is that diasporas are non-state actors whose agency manifests through networked collaborations and communication practices. The Romanian diaspora in the UK is one of the ethnic diasporic communities with the highest capacity for mediation, political representation and advocacy as forms of engagement and diaspora diplomacy. Communication practices range from digital diplomacy to informal PR.

Originality Our paper has multiple original points. Firstly, it deepens the understanding of diaspora diplomacy, connecting the concept with public communication and PR. Secondly, the identification and theorisation of specific forms of engagement of diasporic communities reflects a process which is yet underdeveloped in both types of literature. Thirdly, advancing new theoretical knowledge on informal PR practices is a third point of originality. Findings may be instrumental in providing strategies for relationship building, cultivation, and the engagement efforts of the UK institutions regarding immigrant integration.

Key words: diaspora diplomacy, diasporic communities, advocacy, mediation, representation, Public Relations.

Introduction

Romanian diaspora is the fifth largest community worldwide, with a staggering concentration in Europe (Dolea, 2022, p. 12): 90% on the European continent, largest communities being present in countries such as Italy, Spain, Germany, UK and France

(OECD, 2019). Recent data brings to surface a multiple-waved and circular migration phenomenon (Trandafiroiu, 2013; Sandu, 2021), with complex social ramifications (Dolea, 2022, p. 12): from the impact on Romanian consular network infrastructure and policies on the ground, to cultural adaptation and liaising with the host society's institutions. According to official national statistics (Office for National Statistics, 2021), the Romanian population living in the UK counted up 918.270, according to the ongoing total number of applications for Settled Status counted made by Romanian citizens (Home Office, June 2021). Therefore, the Romanian diaspora is the second largest diaspora community in UK and the first in London.

Accounting for different waves of migration (Rolfe and Roman, 2013), migration studies which have investigated the inclusion practices of Romanian diaspora in the UK (Trandafiroiu, 2013; Pantiru and Barley, 2014) do point out the fact that Romanian immigrants' acculturation is very much dependent on preexistent strong links and bondages with the country of origin: home media, Romanian church and a prior network of friends. Even though these studies do identify the integration or the participation strategy as the most positive amongst the cultural mediation strategies, when it comes to the at community level in the host society, they do mention that a major factor is represented by discrimination (Alassino *et al.*, 2004).

When it comes to cultural inclusion and integration in the host society, the literature focuses on the concept of "citizen engagement" as a way by which the Other, the Foreigner (immigrants, refugees) actively participates at a community level, through initiatives which might contribute to the enhancement of democracy. However, critical scholars (van der Raad, 2013; Rhast and Ghorashi, 2018) do emphasise the fact that minority participation does not necessarily promote social and cultural inclusion, even if the intention of majority of state interventions is to enhance social and cultural inclusion. Referring strictly to the effect of governmental policies and practices to encourage minority participation, authors do mention the fact that "the dominant discourse is hegemonic, meaning that 'most of the people in the society think about their social relations in these terms' (Young, 2010, p. 685)." (Rhast and Ghorashi, 2018, p. 190) The dominant discourse, which promotes images of refugees as a threat to national security and culture or images of refugees and immigrants as weak victims, can feed the self-other gap between local residents and immigrants or refugees (Ghorashi, 2005; Ponzoni Ghorashi and van der Raad, 2017; Reinhard, 2016).

Cultural studies which have focused on diasporic cultural experience point out, in a general way, the importance of a triangular positioning, as the singular focus on economic and political processes of the exclusion/inclusion dynamic is reductive and limitative (Georgiou, 2006); hence, cultural dimensions such as representation and self-representation, local/global and transcultural/transnational are very important in the discussion of diasporic social and cultural dynamics. For the Romanian diaspora community in the UK, due to multiple factors such as negative national media representations (Cheregi, 2020) or negative country image in the host society (Beciu and Lazar, 2016; Dolea, 2018), the integration process proves to be perceived extremely difficult by members of the Romanian diasporic community. While most of the public perceptions studies in the UK report a clear shift from negative to positive attitudes in the last years towards immigration, Romanian immigration is ranked amongst the less desirable in ethnic hierarchies (Blinder and Richards, 2020, p. 7). Also, as Trandafoiu shows (2013, p. 98), in the UK, as a host society, "Since 1962, public opinion has played a crucial role in shaping immigration policies (Geddes 2003: 32)". Recent studies (Dolea, 2020) emphasise the absence of mediating practices between diasporic communities and the institutional actors in the host society (community centres, local councils, media institutions etc).

At the same time, the Romanian diaspora community in the UK is one of the most active and present on social media. The Internet has been extensively investigated in relationship to diaspora communities (Bernal, 2006); however, in the case of Romanian diaspora, websites, forums, social media groups represent important resources and forms of social capital (Ferro, 2004; Nedelcu, 2009; Trandafoiu, 2013). In his study, Ajder (2018) investigated the Romanian Diasporic Facebook groups (RDFGs) and tried to evaluate their nature as public spheres, i.e. spaces in which people can form public opinions that can shape political subjectivity (Habermas 2001, p. 178). From this perspective, the RDFGs are being used for identity negotiation and community-building reasons, but also to enhance collective citizenship behaviours, such as political debate and participation. Ajder's study points out the fact that Facebook has the ability to provide immigrants with a lucrative linkage between the home and host countries (Rheingold, 1993; Wittig and Schmitz, 1996; Ayres, 1999 etc), contributing to activism in the host community but also connecting with issues at home; and suggested that Facebook could share the acclaimed capacity of cyberspace to bypass some spatial and social inequalities, which endows RDFGs with political significance.

Diaspora Diplomacy

Recent studies (Cornago, 2013; McConnell, Moreau and Dittmer, 2012; Ho and McConnell, 2019) have bridged diaspora studies and diplomacy studies to generate a new concept, “diaspora diplomacy”, which foregrounds the geographical dimensions of how diasporas deploy diplomatic practices. Studies of diaspora engagement have so far emphasized the role of diaspora as a medium of state-led diplomatic initiatives. Köşer Akçapar and Bayraktar Aksel (2017, p. 135) discuss the negotiating nature of diaspora diplomacy from this perspective; diaspora institutions (consular network, cultural institutes etc) project domestic policies externally through “state-led transnationalism” (Gamlen, 2014, p. 189) or “long-distance nationalism” (Green Basch *et al*, 1992). As Dolea points out (2022, p. 12), “The Romanian government’s main diaspora policy has been the return of migrants, to tackle the demographic decline, brain drain, labour force shortages and included fiscal facilities, tax rebates, or sectorial grants. Despite positive results of programmes aimed at highly skilled migrants (Anghel and Roman 2021), there is no evidence on the number and proportion of return migration (Anghel and Coşciug, 2018).”

Specifically, this lack of infrastructure capacity from the Romanian government and more focussed policies to support the increasing diasporic communities have left the place for migrant organisations and individual initiatives to negotiate the social and cultural linkages between the country of origin and the host society (Köşer Akçapar and Bayraktar Aksel, 2017, p. 137). The negotiating character of Romanian diaspora in the UK is reflected through practices such as demanding a higher recognition by nation-states and stipulating changes in the policies of home country. The increase of Romanian migrant organisations in the UK, as well as other countries, reflects what Nye (2010b) stated: “the greater flexibility of non-governmental organisations in using networks has given rise to what some call ‘the new public diplomacy’”. Nye therefore discusses another shift in reconceptualizing public diplomacy; he goes beyond the increasing non-state centric realities, and he, as well as Riordan (2003), mentions a further shift of traditional diplomatic processes towards public communication and networked engagement between different types of actors.

Subsequently, our study will follow Ho and McConnell’s conceptualisation of diaspora diplomacy (2019), with extensions to studies exploring the interaction between public diplomacy and PR (L’Etang, 2006; Macnamara, 2012; 2021). As we will discuss more about the role of non-state actors in relationship with host society institutions, we see

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2
3 diaspora diplomacy developed by a diversity of social actors that engage in diplomatic
4 practices. The social reality of diasporas, as groupings, communities and networks seems
5 to have exceeded the existing policies and engagement strategies of both the country-of-
6 origin government and host society institutions. As Martinescu and Balatchi-Lupascu
7 stress out (2020, p. 5), “diasporas have become strategic constituencies, tangibly
8 contributing to the economies, societies and cultures of both their home and host
9 countries”, however, this strategic role is not recognised or valued by either of the two
10 societies (of origin and of residence). The failure to capture the diaspora’s economic,
11 socio-cultural and civic capital into policy agendas (Dolea, 2021) has relevant impact not
12 just on the effectiveness and legitimacy of policy-actions, but it also generates
13 weaknesses, as it may affect, as we also will point out in our study, the distribution of
14 funding for diasporic NGOs and the integration of diasporic communities (Marinescu and
15 Balatchi-Lupascu, 2020).

16
17 By separating diaspora from any state-related initiatives, this shift helps us to examine
18 the nature of soft diplomacy (Nye, 2010) Romanian diaspora in the UK is currently
19 carrying out, by various modes of engagement. For this reason, we consider that diasporic
20 communities can have their own agency, as their actions have an impact on both the
21 country of origin’s and country of residence social and cultural climate. As diplomatic
22 actors, diasporas do exercise a certain type of subjectivity which, according to
23 Constantinou (2013, p. 142), “elevate[s] one into an interlocutor whose separate will,
24 interests, and ways of being deserve to be recognized as constituting ‘external’ affairs”.

25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 **Public Diplomacy and PR**

42 The relationship between the two fields has insufficiently been discussed in PR
43 scholarship. Macnamara (2021) noted that even though there have been different and
44 sometimes even paralleled perspectives, there are major similarities between the two
45 disciplines: 1) all build on the concept of soft power; 2) recognise the need to understand
46 the environment; 3) understand the role of strategic communications; 4) seek to develop
47 relationships and 4) deal with multiple “actors”, publics and groups. As a recent trend,
48 Macnamara also mentions the fact that, as Nye remarked, due to the fact that non-state
49 and non-institutional actors have started to develop diplomatic practices, the new public
50 diplomacy seems to have even more similarities with PR than ever.

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Outlining the connections between these two forms of public communication, L’Etang
(2009) mentions diasporic communities as both targeted audiences for state or

governmental public diplomacy efforts. On the same time, she does recognise the fact that globalisation has led to a fragmentation of identities, at affiliations built on ethnicity and religion in our diasporic world. L'Etang's view is coherent with more recent studies that pinpoint the diaspora's capacity to simultaneously mobilise a certain collective identity in both countries (of origin and the host country), but also at transnational level, with other co-ethnic communities from other spaces and places.

Few recent studies have investigated the relationship between PR and diaspora diplomacy, mostly from an organizational management standpoint. Ozdora-Aksak and Molleda (2014) have explored the relationship between PR and public diplomacy for immigrant integration, identifying uses of strategic communication and public relations strategies to influence public policy and to engage in lobbying. However, this study's main limitations is to singularly focus on diaspora associations as key actors for diaspora diplomacy actions.

Given the already presented features of the Romanian diaspora, we adhere to Nye's meaning of new public diplomacy and L'Etang's perspective of the role of PR. As "PR can only work as engagement, relationship building, negotiation, mutual problem solving, and 'construction of shared social realities' (p. 10) if political, economic, and legal structures, classes, and agents permit." (L'Etang, 2006, p. 620), we will further investigate the ways in which PR and public diplomacy are intricately linked in the Romanian diaspora's actions of mobilizing a collective identity. Our emphasis will therefore be on the discursive nature of PR, as a function present in public communication processes, both visible and invisible (2009, p. 609). We will identify those communication practices by which Romanian diaspora in the UK fosters diplomatic modes of engagement and we will then focus on formal and informal PR practices, visible and invisible, that are being used to mobilise a certain type of collective identity. Our broader standpoint is the fact that, specifically for the Romanian diaspora in the UK, these modes of engagement reflect a clear intention, that of building a new public image of the Romanian immigrant, in opposition with the dominant media representations that still circulate in the UK and influence public perceptions.

Our study

Our focus will be to investigate the capacity of Romanian diaspora in UK to advocate, mediate and represent itself in relationship with institutions of host society, using Ho and McConnell's analytical framework (2019). We focused on Romanian diaspora in the UK,

as this diasporic aggregate has been documented to bear specific features (see Cheregi, 2020; Martinescu, 2019) and then employed a multiple case design made of descriptive micro-case studies (Yin, 2018). When we discuss about “members” of Romanian diaspora, we will identify them in function of their own public identity: as individuals, migrant organisations and networks constituted around a common cause.

We selected those individual and organisational sourced or driven situations which were defined by their initiators as representing Romanian diaspora in the UK. Firstly, we analysed a media event which developed in 2020 and where Romanian diaspora in UK, mostly represented by individual members, built a transnational public sphere around a specific issue. This case study reflects mediation as a first mode of engagement we identified for diaspora diplomacy. The second level of representation brings forward the power and the networked strength of organisational members of the Romanian diaspora in UK. We will focus on one NGO to highlight the ways in which it represents diasporic communities in relationship with home and host countries institutions. The third level is exemplified by an advocacy campaign developed within the constituted network of advocacy NGOs, groups of interest and host society institutions. Its aim is to show how individual, group and organisational members of Romanian diaspora in UK come together to advocate, publicly, for a better representation of Romanian ethnicity within the national Census.

In order to build our descriptive case studies, we purposefully sampled different types of online documents from public sources. Altogether, we have collected: (1) 5 text pages from DOR website; (2) 20 posts from DOR and *Romanian Women in the UK* public Facebook pages (both textual posts and videos); (3) media coverage: 3 in UK media outlets; 10 in Romanian newspapers; (4) campaign materials. This type of data has been analysed using document review, method which has constituted the ground for our descriptive micro-case studies. We then extended our data collection with an exploratory in-depth interview (Johnson, 2011) for our second case study. We have conducted an in-depth interview with the two founders of migrant organisation *DOR – Romanian Diaspora*. The interview aimed to identify, amongst other objectives, the role the organisation has in diaspora diplomacy and the PR practices that drive the organisation’s communication.

Findings

The diasporic communities have multiple forms of diplomatic expression. The Romanian diaspora in the UK is specific in its mediation, representation and advocacy practices. The Romanian diaspora in the UK is very well represented at grassroots level and in the online environment. Its presence ranges from Facebook Romanian Diasporic groups, advocacy organisations or advocacy groups, to individuals who offer their services and support to their Romanian diasporic peers, and media organizations which are more or less active. The presentation of our findings will include several dimensions such as the type of agency (individual or organizational), the modes of mobilization and engagement and the societal reach of its diplomatic practices.

Mediation as a Mode for Identity-building

Mediation is recognized as a form of diplomacy in relationship between two different cultural entities (Shankland, 2020). The current literature on diaspora diplomacy (e.g. Sharp, 2009; Cochrane et al., 2009; Constantinou, 2013; Ho & McConnell, 2019) discusses mediation as a mode of engagement between diaspora and the host-society predominantly in terms of negotiation in conflictual contexts. Our understanding of mediation is perceived more as a soft power form of diplomacy, by which individuals or groups negotiate, in a direct or indirect manner, different interests and agendas. The first strategic dimension for Romanian diaspora in the UK is reflected through its concerted public efforts to socially construct an identity about itself.

The first constructed case study represents a media event where Romanian diasporic members came together and advocated, publicly, for a more responsible representation of Romanians at the level of UK public sphere. As reported by AlJazeera, in November 2020, a member of the Romanian diaspora in UK posted on her social media account a photograph taken in one of Tesco supermarket depicting signs posted at Tesco's Telford branch, in the English Midlands, warning the would-be Romanian thieves of prosecution. These signs have been used in 2019 and produced by the local West Mercia police department in a local campaign aimed at decreasing criminality levels. The sign was written in Romanian and the message was "Shoplifters caught will be prosecuted"). The post has been then covered by Romanian national media, UK liberal media and has generated an upheaval of online reactions, from individual and organizational members of Romanian diaspora in UK. Romanian officials, individuals and writers have reacted, building a compelling counter-narrative in the transnational public sphere. All these actors emphasized the fact that, by using Romanian language, the posters singled out

Romanians and were evidence of a prejudicial attitude towards Romanian diaspora in UK. From the very diverse reactions, we can single out some voices which have also driven the counter-narrative in this situation.

Alexandra Bulat, the chair of Young Europeans, took a public stance and gave interviews for UK media outlets: “Tesco has used a heavy-handed and discriminatory approach that not only will not discourage shoplifters but also offend the majority of law-abiding and well-integrated Romanians living in the UK. (...) Many of them will be customers of the chain – I am one of them. EU citizens living in the UK are no more likely to commit a crime than British citizens.” (Safdar, 2020). Other members of the Romanian diaspora in UK have then reacted, by sending a protest letter to Tesco’s Telford brand managers, building through their interventions a counter-narrative and conveying a clear message. In the same concerted effort, the Romanian Embassy in London has also solicited the removal of such signs (Hendrik, 2020).

Both UK organizations targeted by the accusations, Tesco retailer and Mercia Police department, have publicly reacted. Tesco supermarket reacted through their spokesperson, being prompted by Al Jazeera: “We have had some cases of shoplifting at our Telford Extra Store so the local police provided us with some posters advising that all shoplifters will be prosecuted. We’re sorry if these posters caused any offence – they have now been removed.” (Safdar, 2020). In the same article, the West Mercia police department, which produced the campaign, publicly stated that “‘These posters ... were made available to businesses in the languages most frequently spoken within their communities’, as it claimed the signs were also made in English.”

This is just one of the situations where Romanian diaspora in UK has acted as an ethnic body against negative stereotypes. We can identify the capacity of the Romanian diaspora community to aggregate and form a single public entity, defining itself as a community and building a counter-narrative through both mass media and online media. The response this situation generated can be considered as “the informally mobilized body of non-government discursive opinion, that can serve as a counterweight to the state” (Outhwaite, 1994, p. 483). A groundswell of public opinion has emerged in resistance to the discursive practices of the public institution and to the actions taken by a retailer to support such discursive practices.

Secondly, this case study reflects the transnational and digital capacity of diaspora diplomacy. Individual diaspora members have proactively took actions in the online media and institutionalised media, showcasing opinion leadership skills. In this particular

case, using informal media relations, the aforementioned individuals have promptly countered the xenophobic actions of a UK public institution, generating a public apology and withdrawal of the discriminatory posters. We can see in this type of action an attempt of building public legitimacy as an ethnic community, by deploying soft power tactics to influence the discourse about Romanian immigrants in the UK, at both local and national levels.

However, the case study we chose as exemplification for mediation is dated with 2020. Since then, Brexit and COVID-19 have been the major events which definitely impacted the flows of migrants and their diasporic communities. Dolea (2022, p. 13) considers that, in a paradoxical way, the two events have forged the community: “as Home Office updates (2021) indicate over 1 million Romanians living in the UK, the fragmented diaspora has started to gradually coagulate and gain a certain self-awareness and visibility.” The researcher mentions online, solidarity initiatives and micro-influencers doing a lot of work in the benefit of the diasporic community, through informative sessions regarding the travel rules and the EU settlement scheme. At the same time, Dolea mentions good practices, such as offline programs aimed to support vulnerable migrants implemented by Romanian migrant organisations and associations (Martinescu and Balăţchi-Lupascu, 2020).

Representation as a Mode of Belonging

As Ho and McConnell (2019) pointed out, diasporas are different and diverse, acting and engaging in various ways in the country of residence. The need for socially constructing public legitimacy is the purpose of any diasporic grouping or constituency; and this aim refers to another mode of engagement by which diasporas enact diplomacy, that being representation, alongside communication. Diasporas do use diplomatic tactics and strategies to advance their cause through advocacy, but also as a mode of representation to gain political recognition. The Romanian diaspora in the UK is one of the most ethnic diasporic communities mobilised for political purposes. Recent studies (Vathi and Trandafoiu, 2020; Dolea, 2018, 2022) point out the increasing civic engagement and political activity. Building public legitimacy is an important agenda which any diaspora attempts to achieve; however, Romanian diaspora in the UK has a distinct mode of expression, and that is through its network type of configuration, with extended bridging links which reflect a high relational capacity.

Martinescu, in her study (2019), highlights one distinctive feature of the Romanian diaspora in the UK, the increasing civic and democratic participation. Organizations

founded by members of Romanian diaspora community have developed collaborative projects and partnerships with local institutions, but also with transnational organisations. Most diaspora associations in the UK do have an online presence which fosters better communication with their audiences and enhances the potential for local outreach. Martinescu (2019) continues by concluding that the online presence is an advantage for any diaspora community, as it does increase the frequency of collaborations and partnerships amongst diaspora associations in the same country and beyond. The online presence is vital for interactions with government bodies or institutions; the interactive character of diasporic organisations with host society institutions does indicate the level of public participation to the host country's life and public discourse. For the Romanian diaspora in the UK, we also identified interactions with both local authorities and national institutions, especially those responsible with immigration and community integration. A more recent policy paper deepened the highly networked character of Romanian Diaspora in UK, but also its associative nature. "Whether officially registered or not, diaspora organisations/associations, charities, ad-hoc/volunteer groups, diaspora (online) platforms, all display, promote and engage in different types and layers of interaction." (Martinescu and Balatchi-Lupascu, 2020, p. 17) Our analysis identified the same strengths of the Romanian diasporic community in UK. The website of the Embassy of Romania to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Embassy of Romania to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland nd) aggregates some of the main associations initiated so far which provide social and cultural services for Romanian diaspora members. This list was the starting point of our analysis; through a snowball technique, we soon discovered other organisations which function as local mediators between Romanian diasporic members residing in specific areas and the local authorities or other third-sector organizations. We focused on those organisations which define themselves as having a mediating role between country-of-origin institutions and host society institutions. We identified one organisation named *DOR – Romanian Diaspora*, a recently founded NGO, whose declared mission is active citizenship. On the organisational website, DOR clearly states its mission: "As citizens of Romania and living abroad, we believe it is important we understand both the rules & regulations in our country as well as the host country's. It is our role, as #ambassadors." (dorod.co.uk) Their advocacy platform is democratic participation; our qualitative analysis of their organisational website and Facebook page highlighted the following types of links that the NGO developed so far.

From the analysis of online data, the first type of linkage is the bonding type of association. DOR has developed events and collaborations with other Romanian-founded or Eastern European-founded NGOs and groups of interests who share their agenda. For instance, DOR has extensively collaborated with *Romanian Women in UK* that identifies itself as a “support and promotion group for women in UK” and has a social media presence (a public Facebook group page). They share each other’s social media posts and encourage their audiences to participate and engage in the events one organisation plans. The collaborative spirit of the Romanian diasporic community is reflected in the way the priorities are established; one of the DOR founding members has mentioned during our exploratory interview that access to voting and electoral code are extremely important and they do require priority and long-term vision: “First of all, from a long-term perspective, if we take the example of accessibility to voting. It’s something that we’ve handled since more or less 2014, since the first issues that we had with access to voting in the UK and then, more collaboratively and in a more structured manner, since 2019 with other organizations from the North American and European space. (...) So, there’s long-term planning and long-term strategy and that’s dependent not just on ourselves, but also on the priorities from the other organizations.” (Sorina, DOR)

The associative feature of the Romanian diaspora in the UK is vital for solving emergency situations to which vulnerable migrants are mostly exposed, from labour abuses to precarious accommodation, as it was the example of a Romanian ethnic national; the highly networked nature of the Romanian diaspora in the UK supports both local government and diaspora members: “A very simple call from the *Refugee and Migrant Center* in Coventry who said ‘we have a person sleeping on the street, they appear to be Romanian, we don’t know what they’re talking about, we don’t understand, help!’ That turned out to be five days, almost full time for myself and at least part-time for Adrian and some time from Andra’s support, plus the *Roma Project* who supported almost full time as well, plus the *Refugee and Migrant Center* who also helped.” (Sorina, DOR)

The networked linkages cannot be found only within the national space of host society. DOR has developed transnational collaborations with other Romanian diasporic associations (e.g. from Berlin and Zurich, for instance). The Romanian diaspora in the UK is in constant contact with other European diasporic ethnic communities and are able to create and re-create their “transnational social spaces”. Through the medium of these spaces, these communities and organisations propagate political mobilization. They join forces around a common goal by using political opportunity structures available to them,

such as citizenship and lobbying. On the 5th of February 2021, DOR, the Diaspora Initiative, Civic Diaspora Berlin and Resist Zurich have publicly launched, at the same time, a report titled “Votul în Străinătate – Alegerile Parlamentare 2020” / “The Vote Abroad – Parliamentary Elections 2020”, according to its website (dorod, 2021). As the public press release states (dorod, 2021), the report was the result of a concerted effort of public consultation which aggregated Romanian institutions and diasporic civil society organisations.

DOR also developed active citizenship initiatives in relationship with UK local authorities, trying to bridge the Romanian diasporic community with host society institutions. On the 26th of October 2020, as per their organisational website (dorod, 2020), DOR launched a new project in collaboration with West Midlands Police which consisted of a series of virtual events for Romanian members of Diaspora in UK. Other speakers who participated to the event were representatives of other local hubs and local councils. The main topics of the events were focused on changes enacted by Brexit, security and community integration and aimed to facilitate a better connection between Romanian local residents and the representatives of the institutions from the host society. During the interview, the two founders of DOR have stressed out the importance of their organisation functioning as a bridge between the UK local / central institutions and the Romanian diasporic members, especially during COVID-19: “I think, there was definitely a perceived need to connect with people who are in a similar situation to you and either have a sounding board or a source for advice and support and a reliable group of sharing information. Because I think although the UK is much more transparent in its official communications, I don't think the language is very user-friendly. I think the dissemination methods are very limited and they are not informed by the needs of the users.” (Andra, DOR)

Our examples come to build on Martinescu and Balăţchi-Lupascu's recent findings (2020) which, indeed, position Romanian diaspora in UK in a better position than other diasporic ethnic communities due to its networked and associative features. Therefore, we do consider that the first steps towards a more aggregated and consolidated presence of Romanian diaspora in UK have started to manifest. Policy papers, such as Martinescu and Balăţchi-Lupascu's, focused on providing a framework of engagement and specific recommendations, are valuable in the present discussions.

Practices of Advocacy

Advocacy as a mode of diaspora diplomacy is manifested through political actions against home and host countries to realise their own vision of what constitutes good governance and state-society relations. "Diaspora advocacy refers to actions taken by diasporas to champion causes and impact domestic and foreign policies that affect their status in their countries of origin or countries of immigration." (Ho and McConnell, 2019, p. 245). For the Romanian diaspora in UK, we consider that the public efforts for a redefinition of the country's image in UK and building a relevant network of grassroots actors build towards specific advocacy strategies, with complex intersections. Our case study which evidences the intersections between individual and organisational agency, different modes of diaspora diplomacy (mediation, representation and advocacy) and local / national and transnational is the advocacy campaign delivered by Romanian Women in UK.

Romanian Women in UK is a London based NGO working in aid of the welfare of Romanian women and their families through dedicated services, seminars, meeting, community events and providing representation for authorities in both the UK and Romania. Its online presence is uniquely represented by social media public accounts: a public Facebook group page (@RWinTheUK), a Twitter account and an Instagram account. The organisation doesn't have an official website or blog and for this reason, it can be perceived more as a group of interests than an NGO. The NGO is being referenced on the websites of local councils; for example, on Brent Council's website, the NGO is present with a short description and its contact details: "We support and promote women of various cultural backgrounds through a wide array of services, with an aim to inspire and determine them to accomplish their very best on both a personal and professional level, in specific areas of interest: personal development, education and business. This includes personal development, social, educational and economic integration, entrepreneurship and business as well as preventing social isolation and challenging discrimination." (Brent.gov.uk)

The public Facebook page does not operate as a standardised organisational social media page. It is a group page, with the NGO's representative as moderator. The group page allows members to post anything as long as it is related to the aforementioned NGO's objectives, but it also functions as an online aggregator for the other advocacy organisations from the partnership network, as it does promote *DOR – Romanian Diaspora's* and other partners' events. In a majority of cases, *Romanian Women in UK* either hosts online informative and discussion events, or it is an online media partner for all the other organisations' projects and campaigns. The group moderator is extremely

active in building constant engagement with the online community (e.g. surveys, events etc), but she also mediates between individual members of Romanian diaspora and local / national institutions of the host-society.

During March 2021, *Romanian Women in UK* developed an intensive campaign addressed to Romanian diaspora in UK titled #census2021, whose aims were to inform and raise awareness for the necessity of participating into the national census exercise. The campaign has been conducted online, due to COVID19 restrictions, through social media engagement, certified informative videos (see, for example, Recensământ 2021/ Census2021- Romanian Women in the UK), online events conducted in partnership with other advocacy NGOs and host society institutions (Census2021, Facebook live event). On the Facebook group page, the *Romanian Women in UK* posted intensively both written and visual campaign materials, attempting to reach their audiences and their media partners' publics. The messages focused on the necessity of participating to this national exercise, highlighting the advantages for Romanian members of diaspora in UK, such as better representation at community level and educational services for Romanian children in primary and secondary schools (*Romanian Women in UK*, Facebook post, 10.03.2021). The emphasis on medium-term benefits for Romanian identity as officially recognised ethnicity was one of the strategic choices which the campaign constantly put forward. Secondly, this campaign reflects the networked and associative dimensions of Romanian diaspora in UK. We could notice that the NGO's partners and constant collaborators have been involved in the campaign, by actively contributing as speakers at the online events or redistributing the messages on their social media and online platforms. Also, bonding partners and collaborators, such as *DOR – Romanian Diaspora*, have supported the campaign, by organising Q&A events, in order to engage broader audiences (see Census2021, Facebook event live). The online events were recorded and then published on the Facebook pages and accounts of all the campaign partners. Through concerted actions, these communities of interest would be able to push and advocate for a broader, more impactful policy agenda.

These exercises are more and more visible within the Romanian diaspora in UK. However, as Martinescu and Balaţchi-Lupascu, 2020, p. 21) pointed out, "Despite the demographic size and geographical dispersion across the UK, the Romanian diaspora is not yet relevant or sufficiently integrated at policy, decision-making levels." Due to cooperative actions limited to short-term and localised pursuits, fragmented institutional approach and reduced capacity, what emerges, as we also noticed with our previous case

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3 studies. However, we consider that these are realities start to increasingly change. More
4 associations between different types of actors (media, individual members, community
5 NGOs and hubs, academic researchers etc) become a constant form of engagement.
6
7 Associations between these different actors happen for promoting common interests;
8 collaborative practices are already put in place, generating bonds which hardly break. The
9
10 very recent policy papers we referenced are a sign of a more self-aware and self-
11 reflectiveness behaviour from the Romanian diaspora in UK which attempts to build a
12 public legitimacy and social value. These realities transition from scattered initiatives to
13 diasporic engagement practices.
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22 **Conclusions**

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24 Our case studies analysis has revealed important findings in relationship with previous
25 studies. Firstly, in terms of its relational capacity, the Romanian diaspora in the UK,
26 through individuals self-identifying as Romanian ethnic nationals, social entrepreneurs
27 and migrant organisations, fills the gap in terms of public diplomacy in liaising and
28 mediating the relationships with the host society's institutions. Similar studies have
29 stressed out the relational and networked features of diaspora diplomacy as core
30 dimensions (Rana, 2013). However, we showed that the public diplomacy enacted by the
31 Romanian diaspora in the UK is characterised by both bonding and bridging links, with
32 other in-group members, co-ethnic geographically dispersed diaspora communities,
33 country of origin and country of residence organisations and institutions. These linkages
34 define a high degree of social capital that the Romanian diaspora in the UK mobilises for
35 its own purposes in a constant in-between dynamic (Brinkerhoff, 2019).
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44 Secondly, we have seen that all the diplomatic practices have developed from the need to
45 build public legitimacy and social value in the host society; in the case of the Romanian
46 diaspora in the UK, this need comes as a clear agenda to shift negative public perceptions
47 and media representations. As Trandafoiu points out (2013, p. 23), Romanian diaspora
48 manifests a high level of diasporic reflexivity: "(...) the ability to provide complex and
49 continuous identity reflections as a result of the coexistence of the self within multiple
50 spaces of interaction". This self-reflexivity is present in the case of the Romanian diaspora
51 in the UK in all our three case studies. The strong networked character of the Romanian
52 diaspora in the UK would not be possible without the digital and online communication;
53 the online activism and the politicisation of diaspora are mobilisation practices which
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reflect a rationalisation process (Trandafoiu, 2013, p. 87). The Romanian diaspora in the UK finds itself in an essential moment of defining itself and its positioning (Hall, 2003, p. 237); as a distinction point from Trandafoiu's study, that discusses the non-institutionalised and singularly online expressions of micropolitics, we consider that the Romanian diaspora in the UK, in 2022, finds itself in a point of becoming more articulate and able to develop institutional micropolitics practices.

Thirdly, our study also identified the role of visible and invisible PR in this rationalisation process. We have identified intentional and persuasive communication activities being developed for political representation and advocacy, even if they might have not been developed by PR professionals. The invisible and informal PR practices reinforced the networked character of the Romanian diaspora in the UK, by turning emotions and frustrations into an increased civic and democratic participation. Through media events, networked links and advocacy campaigns, PR practices support and are intertwined with public and diaspora diplomacy modes of performance. Future studies can further explore and institutionalise the concept of 'informal PR',

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