

# **Diaspora Diplomacy and Modes of Engagement.**

## **The case of Romanian Diaspora in the UK**

### **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 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 nature of their communication practices that sustain these forms of diasporic engagement?

*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 findings are that Romanian diaspora in the UK develops a specific model of diplomacy, focused on cultural and political forms of engagement. Firstly, equality and belonging are two key dimensions that clearly define this diasporic community diplomatic actions and practices. Secondly, the communication that fosters its networked and associative features has shifted towards a more democratic and strategic model.

*Originality* Our paper has multiple original points. Firstly, it deepens the understanding of diaspora diplomacy, connecting the concept with strategic communication. 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. 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, strategic communication.

### **Introduction**

We live in increasingly moving worlds, the movement of people, capital and information has led to the creation of transnational spaces, that intersect with national and local cultural levels. As Kennedy (2022) argues, the current diasporic configurations have led to different geographies of connectivity, by which traditionally established relationships,

such as the state-citizen, undertake relevant power shifts. In this context, diasporas become important transnational networks, with relevant symbolic capital and agency, able to impact and change local, national and international political agendas. Following Vertovec, we define diasporas as “imagined communities dispersed from a professed homeland” (2009, p.5); these communities do retain an active interest in maintaining and even developing complex relationships with their country of origin (Bjola *et al.*, 2022). The new diplomacy includes recent changes in communication landscape such as digitalization and focuses on the democratization of public diplomacy through the multiplication of actors, many of them being non-state actors (McConnell, 2017, p. 140). Other scholars also described how these non-state actors produce profound global effects through interconnectivity (Constantinou and Der Derian, 2010, p. 18), the diplomatization of social life (Neumann, 2012) and polyilateralism (Wiseman, 2004, 2010).

Our study finds itself at the intersection between diaspora diplomacy and digital diplomacy. Our interest is to identify the shifting characteristics of diaspora communities, with a specific focus on Romanian diasporas. Recognising the contribution that previous studies made to the current topic (Dolea, 2018, 2020, 2022; Trandafoiu, 2013; Vathi and Trandafoiu, 2020), our research identifies three forms of engagement in the case of Romanian diaspora diplomacy: mediation, representation and advocacy. While previous studies have identified a rising political awareness and visibility in the host societies of Romanian diasporic communities, our research develops this particular dimension within the broader framework of diaspora diplomacy.

### **Negotiation and positioning of diasporic communities**

Romanian diaspora is the fifth largest community worldwide, third of all Romanians living outside of their nation-state, 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. 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, 2021). Therefore, the Romanian diaspora is the second largest diaspora community in the UK and the first in London. Discussing the nature of emigration, social and cultural studies highlighted its political side; Trandafoiu (2013, p. 23) considers protest as the rationale for Romanian emigration, a radical act of no-confidence towards the state’s inability to construct a viable social contract with its citizens. Accounting for different waves of Romanian post-

communist migration (Trandafoiu, 2013), studies have emphasised a transition from circulatory migration, driven more by social mobility and a slow post-communist transition, to permanently settled generations of migrants, driven by an individual self-achievement ethos. As Dolea (2022, p. 12) points out, the effects of this complex and large migration phenomena range from the impact on Romanian consular network infrastructure and policies on the ground, to cultural adaptation and liaising with the host society's institutions.

Cultural studies which have focused on diasporic cultural experience show, 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. Migration studies have explored the continuous exchange and negotiation processes that take place in a host society. Trandafoiu (2013, p. 23) stages out the process of adaptation in the host society from emotional awareness and rationalisation to politicisation. For Romanian diaspora (Trandafoiu, 2013; Pantiru and Barley, 2014), the initial disillusionment is then followed by an awakening, a "diasporic reflexivity" which could be defined by a high self-awareness and a need to fight for equality rights. The online spaces offer Romanian diasporic members a safe forum for rationalising the negative feelings streaming from lacking power; through discussions, Romanian diasporic members reflect and try to redress what could be achieved through collective action. Trandafoiu also mentions the less positive diasporic practices, such as intradiasporic racism and diasporic cannibalism; if the first one is directed towards Roma minority, the second is fuelled by heterogeneity and contestation. The cultural features of Romanian diasporic identity drawn by Trandafoiu (2013, pp. 83-85) are mistrust, dissatisfaction and critical awareness.

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 (van der Raad, 2013; Rast and Ghorashi, 2018). 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 for UK (2013, p. 98), "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). Many studies have emphasised the role of online spaces as places where diasporic members continuously negotiate their transnational identities and reposition themselves. “The resulting identity interrogations taking place within the cyber-diasporic space display a clear reflexivity, which tells the story of how online communities negotiate and organize their diasporic presence on- and offline. I define diasporic reflexivity as the ability to provide complex and continuous identity reflections as a result of the coexistence of the self within multiple spaces of interaction. The condition of marginality and assumed otherness, typical for the diasporic condition, create thus a perpetual diasporic consciousness and the ability to construct coherent political discourses” (Trandafoiu, 2013, p. 23). Ajder (2018) explored 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. 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. 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.

These diasporic online or digital communities have become increasingly relevant for the individual and the diaspora as a collective entity. The aforementioned studies have emphasised their capacity of identity negotiation. Bjola *et al.* (2022) touch upon the hybrid nature of diaspora communities, as their identities and collective reflexivity are shaped both offline and online. As these scholars point out, the lived experiences diasporic communities accumulate through disruption and adaptation might not overlap with the online social capital acquired through complex networks (Diminescu, 2012). What we analyse through our first case study is exactly this intersection between offline

and online identities that Romanian diaspora in the UK community deployed in a specific event. Also, as there is no study up to this point that would show how diasporic digital communities capitalise their power acquired through reflexivity and community-identity to project a new narrative into the public sphere, our paper focuses on a specific online event, highlighting the main features of the new narrative that is currently socio-culturally constructed by Romanian diasporic online / digital communities in the UK.

### **Diaspora Diplomacy**

Recent studies (Cornago, 2013; McConnell *et al.*, 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. From this perspective, diaspora diplomacy has been traditionally considered as a sub-type of public diplomacy (Ho and McConnell, 2019; Cull, 2022). 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 (2010) stated: “the greater flexibility of non-governmental organisations in using networks has given rise to what some call ‘the new public diplomacy’”. However, as Cull (2022) points out,

diasporas aggregate citizens, civic and democratic organisations and their online audiences / publics, therefore the social reality of diasporas, as groupings, communities and networks seems to have exceeded the existing policies and engagement strategies of both the country-of-origin government and host society institutions. Today's diasporic communities "have become strategic constituencies, tangibly contributing to the economies, societies and cultures of both their home and host countries" (Martinescu and Balatchi-Lupascu, 2020, p. 5). According to Trandafoiu (2013), the Romanian diaspora in the UK followed a culturally organisational model described as "less political, less tolerant of ad hoc cultural manifestations, more attentive to quality and more regimented" (2013, p. 109). While lacking the myriadic associative configuration and political visibility other diasporas have built, the Romanian diaspora in the UK manifests its visibility through a more increased volume of online activities (i.e. aggregating online websites and diasporic publications). Secondly, the author does mention two political actions by which the Romanian diaspora in the UK has advocated and campaigned for equal rights on the labour market.

Since 2013, however, there have been important shifts in the dynamics of Romanian diaspora in the UK. Recent studies (Vathi and Trandafoiu, 2020; Dolea, 2018, 2022) mention the increasing civic engagement and political activity. Building public legitimacy is an important agenda which any diaspora attempts to achieve; however, the 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 (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 and 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) concludes 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. In a more recent paper, Dolea (2022) documents the impact that Brexit and especially COVID-19 pandemic had on the

Romanian diaspora in the UK; from the acceleration of the digitalisation of diasporic communication and an augmentation of feelings of alienation and rejection of Romanians by both home and host state, to an increasing coagulation and visibility.

Our paper builds on these perspectives and considerations, by looking into more depth on how individual diasporic members and civic and democratic migrant organisations come together and aggregate around the same issue/cause, therefore deploying soft power actions: representation and advocacy. Our focus is to capture these shifts that previous scholars have identified, but we went beyond these studies to signal the role of socio-cultural mediators that diasporic communities perform between country of origin and host society's institutions.

### **Forms of engagement in Diaspora Diplomacy**

The rise of “non-diplomats” (Cotton and Pedro Sebastiao, 2022, p. 49), as “individuals, groups and institutions that develop international and intercultural communication, which influence the political relations of the States”, creates the need to look at the intersections with civil society diplomacy and digital diplomacy. The rise of diasporas as aggregated entities, with clearly expressed agency and capacity to impact national policy, is a key factor in the way that we will also frame our research. However, what creates a distinct problem for any researcher is to identify a clear analytical framework that applies to the current diaspora diplomacy realities. As we saw, diaspora diplomacy has traditionally been classified as a sub-type of public diplomacy, where the State targeted through its specific actions (policy, regulations, strategic communication etc) diasporic communities. However, diasporas as aggregates and collective entities have independent agency and behave as socio-cultural mediators between the country of origin and host society's institutions. For this reason, the current public diplomacy conceptual frames meet their limitations.

Many studies have mostly focussed on diaspora diplomacy being performed by civil society (e.g. grassroots organisations, community groups or pressure social groups). However, as Anton (2022) emphasises, drawing from Castells' definition of global civil society (2008), the focus on actors is a detrimental approach, as it does not reflect the complexity of its dynamics. Anton (2022, p. 91) considers that “civil society does not work in the same way and neither does its diplomacy; instead, it is fluid, diffuse, less structured, and, to some extent, unpredictable if we try to anticipate its dynamics using models developed for other societal systems”. The key features of civil society diplomacy

are that it originates in the public sphere, it is performed by civil society agents and serves the public interest (p. 93). Ho and McConnell (2022) consider that diasporas have the capacity to independently engage in diaspora politics and diplomatic action to advance their own interests, and that the way in which these communities function is based on an assemblage type of model. We called this type of configuration aggregates; for Ho and McConnell, these assemblages “produce territorialised and de-territorialised forms of power which could reinforce or undermine statist agendas” (p. 20). For diaspora diplomacy, the assemblages are not limited to sovereign states, but include many other actors at sub-national and transnational levels.

For all the aforementioned reasons, the most relevant analytical framework that we consider applying in the present paper is Ho and McConnell’s earlier analytical framework (2019) of diaspora diplomacy, manifested through three types of modes of engagement: mediation, representation and advocacy. 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 and 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 follows a more recent perspective (Balzacq *et al.*, 2019) where the concept 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. 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. 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 deployed for redefining the country’s image in the UK and building a



relevant network of grassroots actors focused Romanian diaspora towards specific advocacy strategies, with complex intersections.

### **Diaspora Diplomacy and Strategic Communication**

Our interest in this particular intersection draws from the fact that diasporic actors aggregate and form assemblages that, as we already discussed, enact change and impact local communities in the host society and governments of both country of origin and host society. To achieve their purposes, diasporic communities do deploy communication activities and build relationships with their publics through event management, media relations, social media management and / or campaigns. Therefore, a discussion about the relationship between diaspora diplomacy and PR or strategic communication is relevant. The relationship between the two fields has insufficiently been discussed in PR scholarship. Macnamara (2021) noted that even though there have been different and sometimes even paralleled perspectives, there are major similarities between the two disciplines: 1) all build on the concept of soft power; 2) recognise the need to understand the environment; 3) understand the role of strategic communications; 4) seek to develop relationships and 4) deal with multiple “actors”, publics and groups. However, these similarities have been discussed in the case of public diplomacy understood as the actions that the State deploys for improving international relations. In our case, we discuss a whole different dynamic; as Bjola *et al.* (2022) discuss, diaspora diplomacy cannot be considered a form of public diplomacy unless it refers to diplomacy through diaspora. The other power dynamic we have developed and analysed in this paper is the diplomacy enacted and performed by diaspora (Ho and McConnell: 2019), in a reactive and proactive way. This new dynamic requires a new theoretical framing.

According to Anton (2022), civil society diplomacy is expressed through civic consciousness (Snow, 2006), shared cause, science (Arranda, 2022; Boulanger and Cotton, 2022) and digitalisation. We consider that diaspora diplomacy is a sub-type of civil society diplomacy, thanks to its networked and associative nature. The connection with PR and, more broadly, strategic communication is a straightforward one, as civil society diplomacy emerges from the strategic communication of assemblages formed by citizens, organisations and institutions which purposefully use communication to collaborate, find solutions against a societal problem, and disseminate the results internationally (Surowiec, 2021; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). Our research highlights these

dimensions, with a specific focus on diaspora diplomacy and its intersections with strategic communication.

### **Our study**

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 identify them in function of their own public identity: as individuals, migrant organisations and networks constituted around a common cause. We select those individual and organisational sourced or driven situations which were defined by their initiators as representing Romanian diaspora in the UK.

Firstly, we analyse a media event which occurred 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 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.

To build our descriptive case studies, we purposefully sampled different types of online documents from public sources. Altogether, we collected: (1) 5 text pages from DOR website; (2) 20 posts from DOR and *Romanian Women in the UK* public Facebook pages (Facebook posts and videos); (3) media coverage: 3 in UK media outlets; 10 in Romanian newspapers; (4) campaign materials (Facebook posts, campaign videos and engagement events). This type of data is analysed using document review, method which has constituted the ground for our descriptive micro-case studies. We then extend our data collection with an exploratory in-depth interview (Johnson, 2011) for our second case study. The in-depth interview was conducted with the two founders of migrant organisation *DOR – Romanian Diaspora* and it 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 case studies analysis will be correlated with the results of the documents review. 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*

The first reconstructed case study represents a media event that occurred in November 2020, where Romanian diasporic members came together and publicly advocated for a more responsible representation of Romanians at the level of UK public sphere.

A member of the Romanian diaspora in the UK (AlJazeera, 2020) 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 diverse reactions, we can single out some themes and voices which have also driven the counter-narrative in this situation. One major theme that we identified by reviewing UK media articles is represented by racism, in this case Tesco being accused

by racial profiling and fuelling discrimination. The tone of the article is predominantly negative towards Tesco and it does allocate most of the media space to Romanian diasporic side. 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). In a later op-ed article published in December by Huffington Post, Mariana Plamadeala, a Romanian migrant ambassador with *Migrant Voice*, the same theme is reiterated, from a personal perspective; the author of the article accuses the reinforcement of negative stereotypes and tries to establish a counter-narrative, where Romanian migrants are good and decent people, keen to integrate into British society (Plamadeala, 2020). We could not identify other media articles published in UK media outlets covering this event.

Both UK organizations targeted by the accusations, Tesco retailer and Mercia Police department, publicly reacted. Tesco supermarket emitted an official statement 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.” (Safdar, 2020). Both organisations’ communication downplays and deflects the responsibility in this particular context. The key issue, why the signs were written in Romanian, is not addressed and is being completely ignored by both types of organisations.

While the event has been barely covered by the UK media outlets (national or local), the event has attracted the attention of both Romanian national media outlets and Romanian diasporic online media. The major theme is still racism, but with multiple nuances and a very different tone; words such as “offensive” (Stefan, 2020), “outrageous” (Lica, 2020) and “undignified” (Iriciuc, 2020) associated the facts. Romanian media articles also mentioned the actions that some Romanian diaspora members and Romanian diplomatic institutions undertook. The open letter that Iolanda Clotilde, a politically involved Romanian migrant in the UK, wrote and shared publicly was then sent to Tesco’s Telford

brand managers. What is most relevant is that in Clotilde's message, there is a clear attempt to differentiate 'good Romanians' from 'bad Romanians': "Targeting a certain nationality feels blatantly racist and xenophobic. I know we have certain disgusting individuals that don't give us any pride, but there's the likes of them in any country, any nationality. When there's honest, hardworking people that work in the UK legally, this is not fair. Good job, Tesco." (Romania Journal.ro, 2020). Reproducing negative and positive cultural stereotypes is a characteristic of diasporic reflexivity and ethos, which also includes intradiasporic racism. The official messages coming from the Ministry of External Affairs and the Romanian Embassy in London also solicited the removal of such signs (Hendrik, 2020). However, as expected, the tone is much more formal and restrained; the firm institutional stance on disavowing any xeno-racist practices has been manifested through formal channels (i.e. to UK Home Office) and media channels (Romania Journal.ro).

This case study highlights 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. As we firstly tried to identify what are the forms of engagement by which diaspora members enact their role as diplomats for ethnic diaspora communities, we could see forming a reactive "informally mobilized body of non-government discursive opinion, that can serve as a counterweight to the state" (Outhwaite, 1994, p. 483). The organic formation of a public opinion is directly linked to institutional xeno-racism and has emerged in resistance to the discursive practices of the public institution. Secondly, correlating the themes of discrimination and xeno-racism to the nature of their communication practices that sustain these forms of diasporic engagement, we consider that this case study reflects the transnational and digital capacity of diaspora diplomacy. Individual diaspora members 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.

### *Representation as a Mode of Belonging*

The second case study reflects the constant work of migrant grassroots organisations in liaising between country-of-origin institutions and host society institutions to support the UK diaspora community. The website of the Embassy of Romania to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland aggregates some of the main associations initiated so far which provide social and cultural services for Romanian diaspora members (Embassy of Romania to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland n.d). 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. A document review has been conducted on organisational texts published between 2020 and 2021; also, an exploratory interview conducted with the founders of the organisation has been analysed to support the secondary research. This analysis highlighted two major themes: equal rights and integration. 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 through active citizenship; their projects and programs are directed and focused on this direction.

Equal rights represent the first theme we identified in the organisation’s discourse; voting rights represent one key point of DOR’s democratic participatory activity. 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 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)

Another dimension by which DOR develops the concept of active citizenship is represented by cultural and advocacy projects developed at a transnational level. 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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.

Integration and belonging reflect another major theme we identified in the organisation’s discourse, through programs or ad-hoc actions implemented to support vulnerable migrants or more strategic projects that reinforce local links. The associative feature of the Romanian diaspora in the UK is vital here 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)

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 26<sup>th</sup> 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)

Correlating the present themes extracted from diasporic organisational discourse to the first question of our research, we can partially conclude that Romanian diasporic organisations build an institutional agenda through their networked configuration. Equal rights, integration and belonging build a broader narrative by which Romanian diaspora in UK positions itself in a better position than other diasporic ethnic communities due to its networked and associative features (Martinescu and Balatchi-Lupascu, 2020). Active citizenship does reflect a common organisational behaviour that seems to aggregate multiple organisations and groups of interests together. When looking at how these themes are correlated to the nature of their communication practices that sustain representation as a form of engagement, we identified the capacity of these organisations to deploy digital and online communication practices, such as sharing information, or collaborating and supporting other peer-organisations.

#### *Practices of Advocacy*

Our third case study evidences the intersections between individual and organisational agency, different modes of diaspora diplomacy (mediation, representation and advocacy) and local / national and transnational levels. The advocacy campaign #census2021 was



implemented by another NGO, in partnership with DOR. Our document review has analysed campaign materials, such as Facebook posts and campaign videos or engagement events.

*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 (Brent.gov.uk, n.d.). 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 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, entrepreneurships and business as well as preventing social isolation and challenging discrimination." (Brent.gov.uk, n.d.)

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; 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 most 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* deployed an intensive campaign addressed to Romanian diaspora in the 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 implemented in partnership with other Romanian migrant organisations (DOR Romania Diaspora, Romanian Society East Midlands and local community advisors). The broader aim, as DOR representatives also mentioned during the exploratory interview, was to increase political participation as to include Romanian

nationality amongst the ethnic options included in the Census. The campaign was 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 key themes of the campaign revealed through our document review analysis were the equality rights, civic participation and political representation. The info sessions (*Census2021*, 2021) 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 (*Census2021*). Also, bonding partners and collaborators, such as *DOR – Romanian Diaspora*, supported the campaign, by organising Q&A events, in order to engage broader audiences. 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. The impact of the campaign led by *Romanian Women in the UK* and other migrant organisations could be indirectly linked to the rate of participation of Romanian citizens in the UK census 2021. For England and Wales, there have been 499.430 participants (*Census2021*); also, this was the first census exercise that included Roma ethnic identity amongst the options in the census form (Child, 2021). More broadly, these accumulated diplomatic actions do increase the diaspora capacity for political representation at both national and local levels.

Correlating the public discourse themes that these campaigns brought forward with our research questions, we can see that the advocacy, as a diasporic mode of engagement, is

directly linked to the communities' need to be politically represented at local and central levels. This consideration does build on previous studies, such as Martinescu and Balatchi-Lupascu's (2020, p. 21), where it was pointed out that "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, the Romanian diaspora in the UK, as well as other diaspora communities struggle to become more focused and aggregated. Since 2020, 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." Relating to our second research question, we consider that advocacy campaigns, supported and enhanced by the existent networks, as well as solidarity initiatives, micro-influencers and offline programs supporting vulnerable migrants (Dolea, 2022) are the main communication and engagement practices we identified.

### **Towards a framework of analysing diaspora diplomacy**

Our case studies analysis has revealed important findings in relationship with previous studies. Firstly, Romanian diaspora in the UK developed a specific model of diplomacy, focused on cultural and political forms of engagement. Its diplomatic actions and practices are enhanced by its relational capacity, both networked and associative. Therefore, the present study contributes to the existent theoretical literature by showing how assemblages or different diasporic entities (individuals self-identifying as Romanian ethnic nationals, social entrepreneurs and migrant organisations) use mechanisms of social influence for civic and democratic enhancement, at local, national and transnational levels. Its practical contribution lies in helping communities and nonstate actors optimise their strategic or tactical approach and deepen their societal impact.

Secondly, the communication that fosters its networked and associative features has shifted towards a more democratic and strategic model. We highlighted how online and digital communication has created spaces for Romanian diaspora in the UK to aggregate various voices and channel them towards a common purpose. Romanian diasporas have always been very visible and present online, as we found out from other studies. However,

what is specific for the Romanian diaspora in the UK, is the fact that all these dispersed nodes become more connected through common projects. Concentrated around cultural and political areas of interest, online aggregates put forward common projects that serve multiple publics and audiences. Also, these efforts, being more concentrated, start to have broader common purposes, such as changing negative public perceptions and media representations. Our study therefore contributes to the existent debate around integration and adaptation, increasingly important in a multicultural world. The results of our research can have a great contribution to the construction of any diaspora also for the new citizens, seen and analyzed as diaspora's e-citizens, or virtual citizens, whose diplomatic activities such as events, creation of associations, and advocacy became forms of engagement for diplomacy.

Lastly, our study broadens the spectrum of the conversation about diasporas as agents of change in civil diplomacy. The change is being directed both on the country of origin's international relations policies for diasporic communities and on the host society's government policies for migrant communities. We showed how Romanian diaspora in the UK, through networked and associative efforts, doubled by digital and online communication practices, has become to behave as an entity, deploying diplomatic actions for changing public attitudes and impact national governments' policies on equality rights. Our paper's contribution has been to also highlight the role of migrant grassroots organisations who mediate and establish local relationships, at community level.

However, these dimensions of engagement that diaspora diplomacy develops have to be linked with strategic communication, as we advocated from the beginning of this study. Mediation, representation and advocacy are forms of civil society diplomacy, but what is specific for diasporic communities is their capacity to channel the diasporic discursive reflexivity developed in online spaces towards political action. The strategic communication can be seen in 1) the ability of diasporic communities to aggregate and bring together individuals (mediating citizens), organisations (mediating migrant organisations, institutions from both the country of origin and host society), networks (transnational networks of diasporic migrant organisations); 2) the communication efforts that build strong and weak linkages which can be activated to set the media and institutional agenda; 3) the impact and soft influence that diaspora diplomacy embeds (e.g. changes in local communities' attitudes towards migrants; shifting media narrative regarding migrants). Our study clarifies the links between diaspora diplomacy and

strategic communication, while advancing a possible analytical framework of diaspora diplomacy.

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