

# 'We are not Tolerant as a Nation, but we want Others to Tolerate us': Romanians' Experiences of Discrimination and their Attitudes Towards British People

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses findings from a qualitative study conducted for my MPhil dissertation. It draws on the views and experiences of Romanian citizens living in the UK, collected before the June 23rd UK referendum on ending EU membership. It addresses two aspects from my thesis, which are highly relevant to the topical Brexit debates: on the one hand, what kinds of discriminatory experiences Romanians faced in the receiving society, and, on the other hand, how Romanian migrants perceived the British. For the purpose of this short paper, the empirical data is illustrated in the form of two case studies, the stories of Avram and Medeea, which include dominant themes on both aspects. Overall, the paper presents an apparent contradictory discourse and reflects on its potential explanations. While condemning negative attitudes towards them in the UK, Romanians showed their own negative attitudes towards the British (and 'others' in general). They frequently embraced the very stereotypes about fellow Romanian migrants, which they vocally condemned in other instances. A class dimension to stereotypes emerges throughout the discussion. The paper is open-ended and the conclusion reflects on how the UK's decision to leave the EU can add complexity to the presented findings.

**KEY WORDS:** Brexit, Romanian migration, discrimination, British attitudes, migrant attitudes, migrant stereotypes, contact theory, perceptions of class, integration.

## Context and previous research

Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 and the more recent removal of work restrictions for its citizens in 2014 provoked intense media and political debates in the UK. There have been concerns that large numbers of Romanians will come to take advantage of the British job market and welfare state. While their motivations to choose UK as their migration destination are complex, and not limited to work and welfare, the increasing number of Romanian migrants in the UK is clearly illustrated in statistical data. According to 2016 reports from the Office for National Statistics, Romania topped the list of the five most common countries from which people immigrated in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Like in the case of Polish

1 ONS, "Migration Statistics Quarterly Report," 23.

migration to the UK after the 2004 Accession, EU2 (Romanian and Bulgarian) migration is, according to the latest figures, the only type of EU population intake to show increasing NINo registrations. A2 migration flows take place in the context of record-high overall net migration figures, thus resisting the Home Office's efforts in reducing the number of migrants from inside the EU.

How are those recent migrants received in the UK? Academic literature has emphasised the ways in which Romanians have been victims of unfair (tabloid) media, which have racialised and demonised the migrants in question<sup>2</sup> and portrayed them as undesirable, poor, criminal, culturally different and generally having a negative influence on the receiving country.<sup>3</sup>

2 Light and Young, "European Union enlargement."

3 Fox et al, "The racialisation."

Previous studies have also addressed the everyday discrimination Romanians face in the UK. As this paper later illustrates, adding to findings from published research, these negative experiences continue to exist. This is despite the fact Romanians have had, since 2014, full (civil and working) rights in the UK, just like any other EU migrants. Arguably, with the Brexit vote, the situation of EU migrants generally, not only Romanians, has been increasingly insecure. Moreover, reported discrimination has risen.

The discrimination faced by migrants is correlated to the nature of attitudes towards migrants in the country. British attitudes towards migrants have been discussed in the previous months, especially in the context of the EU referendum.<sup>4</sup> The UK is a peculiar case amongst Western European countries because of the concerning level of hostile attitudes towards migration. Negative - or at least sceptical - attitudes were present and recorded long before the referendum. Despite the UK being known internationally for its active promotion of tolerance and diversity, local attitudes towards migration do not construct such a progressive picture. For example, the 2014 Eurobarometer results show that, while 18% of all Europeans considered immigration an important national issue, 38% of the British did so.<sup>5</sup> Even before Brexit campaigners outlined their arguments for reducing migration, there was already a large majority (77%) of respondents in the British Social Attitudes survey who wanted migration reduced either by a 'little' or 'a lot'. The majority of those selected the latter op-

4 Although, to my knowledge, there are no major attitudes surveys differentiating migrants by nationality, there are qualitative studies exploring British attitudes towards migration, in which some participants talk about Romanians (e.g. Leddy-Owen, "Liberal Nationalism")

5 Eurobarometer, 2014, cited in Paluchowski and Marco-Serrano, "United Kingdom," 22.

tion.<sup>6</sup> According to YouGov<sup>7</sup>, greater control of EU migration and limiting benefits for EU migrants were the most popular requests during David Cameron's negotiations prior to the referendum. Additionally, the UK has witnessed increased support for the UK Independence Party<sup>8</sup>, which arguably shifted the entire debate on EU migration to the right. This put pressures on traditionally pro-immigration British parties, such as Labour, who limited their open support for further migration in the referendum context.<sup>9</sup> Thus hostility towards EU migration was not created by the referendum campaign itself, as some may claim. Negative attitudes towards EU migrants, which existed long before the referendum, were only legitimised, strengthened and popularised through the Brexit campaigns and later, by the vote to leave the EU.

However, British attitudes towards EU migrants do not exist in a vacuum. It is important to equally assess the 'other side' of attitudes towards migration, which is EU migrants' own views on different types of migrants in the UK, as well as their openness towards locals. Until recently, there was very little focus on these aspects, and further analysis is required. Paskeviciute and Anderson are amongst the first scholars to claim that migrants' views on migration (including the migration of their nationals or co-ethnics), despite having both theoretical and empirical relevance, have been largely ignored, because researchers have chosen to focus on native populations.<sup>10</sup> In the UK

6 Ford and Heath, "Immigration: a nation divided?", 79.

7 YouGov, "YouGov Survey Results."

8 UKIP gained 3,881,099 votes in the last General Election (BBC, "Election 2015"), representing a significant increase compared to 919,546 in 2010 (BBC, "Election 2010").

9 See Ford and Goodwin, "Revolt on the Right", for a comprehensive discussion on the rise of UKIP and its impact on British politics of migration.

10 Paskeviciute and Anderson, "Dual allegian-

context, a number of researchers, whom I refer to throughout this paper, recently explored some of the relations between EU migrants and the local population or other groups in the UK. There is a small body of literature on EU migrants' attitudes towards the British. One important finding is that EU migrant interviewees tend to imagine the British as only white.<sup>11</sup> This is reflected in my own fieldwork with Romanians. Second (or third) generation migrants living in the UK were not seen as part of the local British population: Black British, or Indian British, for example, were simply described as Black or Indian 'migrants' by the majority of my participants. A few even emphasised that there was an obvious difference between 'white', 'true British' and the 'others' who were 'impostors' in their view. More research is thus needed to analyse the different attitudes towards 'types' of British people.

Although there are clearly recent efforts to cover issues of EU migrants-British relations, there is no comprehensive study on Romanians' attitudes in this sense. This is despite the popularity of Romanians in media and political discourse, who were often singled out as examples by politicians such as UKIP's Nigel Farage in support of pro-Brexit arguments. Moreover, as previously mentioned, the increasing number of Romanians in the UK is another argument for selecting Romanian migration as a research focus. To emphasise this, Kaczmarczyk noted that 'in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, the scale of migration from Poland is comparable only with the migration propensity of Romanians'.<sup>12</sup>

Two main research problems have been defined in the context discussed so far. First, there is a need to know in what ways Ro-

11 Rzepnikowska, "Convivial cultures." and Malanova, forthcoming PhD thesis.

12 Kaczmarczyk, "Poland," 33.

manians interact with the local British-born population, and the inverse. Second, analysing what attitudes Romanian migrants have towards their co-nationals living in the UK, as well as other migrants, is essential in uncovering the other side of attitudes towards migration. Previous research offers some useful insights into unpacking those problems, especially the first one. The vast majority of papers on Romanians carry a common message: Romanians have often been the victims of unfair and sometimes xenophobic discourses, which affected their everyday lives in various ways. One of the more comprehensive studies on Romanians in the UK is Briggs and Dobre's ethnography. In 2014 they wrote about Romanians' experiences prior to the expiration of work restrictions, analysing forty with Romanians in lower-paid work. The ethnography only briefly mentioned how participants interacted with other cultures and nationalities, focussing instead on the hardship Romanians faced in London. For example, it addressed difficulties regarding documentation, illegal work and instances when Romanians were discriminated against. The authors underlined Romanians' inferior position as victims in an unfair society, situated 'below most, if not all' in a social hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> In this ethnography and other articles, such as Fox et al's,<sup>14</sup> the Romanians' situation illustrates the 'new racism'<sup>15</sup> or colour-blind racism.<sup>16</sup> This concept is not so 'new' in fact - it has been theorised in the 1980s by researchers of 'white migration' to the United States. According to this theory, the 'unnoticed white migrants'<sup>17</sup> become white

13 Briggs and Dobre, "Culture and immigration in context," 27.

14 Fox et al, "The racialisation".

15 Barker, "The new racism".

16 Bonilla-Silva, "Racism without racists".

17 Castles and Kosack, "Immigrant workers," 2.

racialised identities<sup>18</sup> in an era of ‘colour blindness’.<sup>19</sup> This process of xeno-racialization, or, to put it more visually, of the poor ‘becoming the new black’,<sup>20</sup> has been the dominant framework used to explain Central and Eastern European migrants’ discrimination in Western states.<sup>21</sup> The new (Eastern European) migrants become ‘coloured white’<sup>22</sup> in host societies: they are ‘invisible’ due to their skin colour, but become ‘visible’ through their migrant status, language, culture, economic and other characteristics. Similar to other groups in the history of migration, Romanians become ‘suitable enemies’ in the UK at particular moments in time, such as immediately prior to and after being granted full rights to work, and, more recently, in the context of the EU referendum. Although it is paramount to research the discrimination and dilemmas migrants face, there is always the risk of romanticising migrant narratives, as Romocea<sup>23</sup> and others pointed out. The stories many migrants tell the interviewer are touching and will have a priming effect when researchers decide ‘whose side are we on’.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, previous literature does not only portray Romanians as a harmless migrant group, as people relocating to work hard while being accepting of everyone. For instance, there is a significant number of studies focusing on Romanians’ negative attitudes towards the Roma. Discrimination against the Roma is a well-researched issue in Eastern Europe; negative discourses towards them extend from individual conversations to institutions and even the media. Briggs and Dobre stated that their Romanian participants

were distancing themselves from the Roma.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Fox et al emphasised how Romanian migrants often deny discrimination by differentiating between themselves from the Roma.<sup>26</sup> An image of ‘us’ Romanians and ‘them’ Roma is therefore constructed inside the ‘Romanian-born migrant group’.<sup>27</sup> Discourse analysis by Tileagă even went as far as to suggest that Romanians’ talk about the Roma ‘is more extreme than the anti-alien, anti-immigrant prejudice talk studied by numerous western critical researchers’.<sup>28</sup>

With the Roma exception, little is known about how Romanians perceive other groups, how they see natives, and how they regard their ‘own group’, however they may define it. In this context, researchers have advocated fresh research on the ‘human face’ of recent migration, carried out by students and academics, who are usually migrants themselves.<sup>29</sup> More specifically, Moroşanu, one of the first UK based researchers studying Romanian migration, emphasised the lack of studies on migrants’ attitudes towards other populations.<sup>30</sup> Briggs and Dobre also identified the potential for more research on how Romanians interact with other migrant groups and with British nationals.<sup>31</sup> Researchers have thus acknowledged these areas of further inquiry in the growing literature on newer EU migrants, which need to be addressed.

18 Garner, “Empirical research”.

19 Lewis, “What group?”.

20 Sivanandan, “Poverty is the new Black”.

21 For example, Dawney, “Racialisation”.

22 Roediger and Barrett, “In-between peoples”.

23 Romocea, “Ethics and emotions”.

24 Becker, “Whose side are we on?”.

25 Briggs and Dobre, “Culture and immigration in context,” 60.

26 Fox et al, “Denying Discrimination,” 743.

27 A part of Roma in the UK have Romanian passports or IDs and are counted as Romanians in UK statistics.

28 Tileagă, “Accounting for extreme prejudice,” 603.

29 Favell, “The new face,” 702.

30 Moroşanu, “Researching co-ethnic migrants,” par. 28.

31 Briggs and Dobre, “Culture and immigration in context,” 9.

### Brief notes on methodology

The overall findings presented in this paper are based on the views and attitudes of forty-five Romanian-born citizens living in the UK. The were carried out between December 2015 and April 2016, before the EU referendum, but during heated debates on EU membership. Many of the conversations carried on after recording stopped and field notes were taken to complement the recorded material. The findings were further informed by attending Romanian events in London, taking field notes while observing Romanians interact on public transportation or at train stations, personal experiences with Romanians and reading countless posts from Romanian Facebook groups corresponding to the locations where took place (e.g. Români în Londra<sup>32</sup>). Romanians were interviewed in different neighbourhoods in order to capture the variety of experiences they faced.<sup>33</sup> Different ethnic compositions of an area compared to another (e.g. London and Cambridge) encourage reflection on how location might affect Romanians' experiences of discrimination and their attitudes towards the British. Romanians were recruited through a

32 When last checked in December 2016, this group had 129, 527 active members - mainly Romanians already living in London and some Romanians who plan to come to London. The author reads daily posts on this group, which range from solidarity actions, such as helping fellow Romanians in London and elsewhere in the UK, to rather unpleasant posts about Romanians or other national and ethnic groups.

33 36 interviews were carried out only for the MPhil thesis, with an additional 20 conducted by the researcher for the YMOBILITY ([www.ymobility.eu](http://www.ymobility.eu)) project. Some participants were interviewed for both purposes. The overall number of participants is 45. The author wishes acknowledge the YMOBILITY team who offered her training and Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley, who supervised the dissertation on which this article is based. - Participants were interviewed in five locations: Cambridge, Chester, Birmingham, Brighton and Greater London (zones 1-6). All participant names are pseudonyms.

range of methods so that the probability of targeting a specific group was minimised. Participants were found first through snowball strategies, then through Facebook groups such as Români în Londra and Români în Cambridge and also through Gumtree advertisement.

The sample of forty-five individuals is diverse. There is almost a gender balance - twenty-four women and twenty-one men. Nine were students in the UK, twelve did not have a degree level qualification and twenty-four were educated to a degree-level or higher. From those with a degree, only seven had a job described to be 'reflecting their qualifications'. This shows the well-researched phenomenon of migrant downskilling (as well as skill mismatch in the job market), explored in depth in previous research. Some Romanians came to the UK as their second or third country of migration. They have been living in the UK for periods ranging from three months to twenty-six years. The age range is eighteen to fifty-four and the mean is twenty-nine (with one participant not disclosing his age). Most participants were Romanian citizens only, but I also interviewed two Romanian Hungarians, one Romanian Moldovan and two British Romanians.

The interviews, conducted in Romanian, were transcribed directly into English by the author. The initial coding consisted in thinking about the data, following Robson's question of 'what is this piece of data an example of?'<sup>34</sup> The data were then explored further through focused coding, following Charmaz's constructivist model of grounded theory,<sup>35</sup> by selecting relevant 'initial codes and test them against extensive data'.<sup>36</sup> In total, the compiled data I focused on comprised 255 12-sized typed pages

34 Robson, "Real world research," 218.

35 Charmaz, "Constructing grounded theory,"

42.

36 Ibid., 148.

of relevant fragments on either experiences of discrimination, or attitudes towards natives, minorities and co-nationals. Because all data are subject to the researcher's interpretation, interview fragments are presented in the context they occurred,<sup>37</sup> so the reader can judge the reliability of the analysis. The case study presentation helps in this sense, because it links the attitudes to participants' contexts and migration stories, compared to the technique of presenting a decontextualised mix of selective quotations from all forty-five interviewees. Lastly, the researcher's positionality, as a Romanian-born citizen living in the UK, needs to be taken into account when reflecting on the interpretation of findings.<sup>38</sup>

### Discussing findings through case studies

Having the context, relevant literature and methodology in mind, the article proceeds by comparing and contrasting the cases of two Romanian participants. The two participants' accounts illustrate how attitudes towards British locals and Romanian migrants are constructed through the interviews, emphasising the class dimension that many of them had. Avram and Medeea, a man and a woman both in their thirties, came from different backgrounds, worked in different job sectors and do not have the same level of education. Although social attitudes tend to differ according to these variables, their perspectives about British people and fellow Romanians, were largely similar. Although often worded differently, their views were rather typical of the overall attitudes expressed in the sample. Both had 'in-between' attitudes about the British and the way they were perceived in the UK. Both praised their own work ethic and criticised some co-nationals in the UK, especially the less integrated, 'lower class' ones. However, Avram showed extreme views about racial and religious others, even describing himself as a 'racist and Islamophobe'. He deliberately avoided contact with some groups he 'did not like'. In contrast, Medeea thought of herself as fully integrated into the British culture. She clearly expressed her attachment to diversity, having friends of mixed races and ethnicities and also a British partner. Before analysing their stories, it is essential to present the main findings from all the interviews, so the reader can understand how these are represented through the two individual cases.

To start with, it is important to acknowledge that about half of my interviewees openly stated that they experienced discrimination in

<sup>37</sup> Rapley, "The art(fulness)," 319.

<sup>38</sup> Due to space limitations, please refer to my dissertation, which discusses methodology in more detail, including positionality.

various forms. Some others had friends or relatives feeling discriminated against, or heard from third parties about cases of Romanians treated unfairly. Some participants denied discrimination and a few were situated on the opposite end of the spectrum, feeling welcomed in the UK. When aware, participants were usually critical of media portrayals of Romanians. Most who confessed feeling discriminated against noted negative reactions from people when disclosing their Romanian nationality. About half noted how others mistook them (Romanians) for Roma. They were usually upset by this association, even when this was done jokingly by natives or others. These reactions were not limited to associations with the Roma. A related emerging theme was that Romanians felt other (EU) migrants were more welcomed in the UK than they were. The other common type of discrimination stories happened in the workplace. The phenomenon of deskilling can be regarded as a form of indirect discrimination. Deskilling is interlinked with the precarious work many Eastern Europeans do especially in the service sector. Although most were happy with their work, some participants believed that Romanians do not have equal opportunities in the job recruitment process. The most disheartening experiences were of participants who were significantly underpaid, with one man being paid as little as £3 an hour in a car wash, when the minimum wage was £6.70 for someone of his age at that time. Another type of experience was direct discrimination during the job, encountered in the form of discriminatory comments or actions taken by clients or staff in the workplace. Moreover, one participant was a victim of physical abuse on a street during daylight, which he thought happened because he was Romanian. But how did Romanians react to

such experiences? First, it has been commonly acknowledged that migrants show low levels of reporting racist or discriminatory incidents because they do not know how and whom to report it to, and often lack the linguistic competence to do so. It seems this applies to some interviewees. Second, although not making formal complaints, other participants mentioned how they sought to challenge and change British people's negative opinions, by showing them the 'positive side' of Romanian culture.

Nevertheless, despite this rather discouraging picture, some participants did not feel disadvantaged. Some linked not feeling discriminated with their good work ethic. Very few did not identify as Romanian, but instead chose to define themselves as Europeans, world citizens or other, stressing that they could not be discriminated based on their nationality. Additionally, some explained discrimination happened because one was 'a foreigner', but not due to being of a particular ethnicity or nationality. In addition, participants who migrated to another country before arriving in the UK tended to feel more accepted. This calls for a comparative perspective in future research, questioning whether Britain is more welcoming to Romanians than other European countries, particularly post-Brexit. Throughout the case studies, some of these main points are contextualised and exemplified by interview data.

However, discrimination or the lack of such experiences constitutes only one frame the study of Romanian migrants can take. Despite generally criticising some British people for being intolerant and discriminatory towards them, Romanians also engaged in stereotyping the British. Nevertheless, about half of my participants did not have meaningful conver-

sations with British people. Thus the stereotypes were not based on personal experience, but rather on 'imagining the British'. Their reasons for not interacting more with locals were mainly the lack of English language abilities or simply that it was more difficult to become friends with them, compared to other people who were considered more culturally proximate (such as Italians or Spanish migrants). The participants who felt 'close' to British people were women who had a British partner or Romanians who interacted daily with British people at their workplace as part of teams or at university. Interviewees showed mixed opinions regarding the British, but there were some themes stressed by most participants. One common depiction was that British people are 'lazy'. The overwhelming majority of participants believed in this stereotype. Romanians perceived the British to be less efficient at work compared to them. Especially men who worked in construction or related industries stressed this. Additionally, many participants described natives as 'hypocrites' or 'fake'. Some participants observed xenophobic and racist views amongst the British and questioned them in relation to Britain's colonial past. They believed British people should not complain about migrants coming to the UK, when they were first to 'invade countries'. A related theme was that natives were hypocrites for not recognising migrants' positive contributions to the UK. Finally, there was a recurring theme of 'benefit scrounger Britons'. Some participants mentioned that natives are the ones draining the system, while they blame the migrants for this. Less frequent negative depictions related to alcohol usage. Critiques were directed towards the relationship between British parents and their children, who were not seen as sharing Roma-

nians' family culture. Nevertheless, compared to racial, ethnic or religious minorities (such as Indians and Muslims, described in my thesis), natives received a wide range of positive characterisations, such as being 'open-minded' (contradicting, in many cases, previous statements about them as xenophobic) and 'helpful'. The 'civic spirit' and 'respecting the rule of law' were also amongst the top positives about Britons, which were understandable, considering that many participants disclosed that they left Romania because of the 'corrupt system'.

Lastly, perhaps the most surprising finding was a dominant narrative of wanting to avoid Romanians altogether, or certain 'types' of co-nationals. This was because many felt disappointed with how Romanians tried to 'trick' them when migrating to the UK. Although I observed solidarity in online communities (e.g. crowdfunding help with the repatriation of bodies, financially support for Romanians who lost their job et cetera), many participants did not have a pleasant experience with co-nationals. Moreover, a few participants avoided Romanians particularly because they disagreed with co-nationals' negative views on racial, sexual or other minorities. However, although I observed many instances when Romanians expressed racist views in everyday life (for example, while on the London underground), those situations should be seen reflexively. Perhaps Romanians felt they could express socially unacceptable views more freely in public when talking in Romanian, compared to the majority population that could not do this without being understood by almost everyone else.

But how were some of these experiences described in participants' own words? And how did they fit into their migration stories?

### A. Avram

*There is discrimination but, unfortunately, I have to say this to you, it is rather justified.*

*Here the Briton finishes college, lives in his mum's basement, plays on X-box and asks for benefits.*

The first case study is Avram, a man in his mid-thirties, married to a Romanian. When I met him, he had already had been living three years in the UK and working in IT. In Romania, he chose not to pursue a university degree. Instead, he started to work straight after college, doing a variety of jobs, although a career in IT was his aim. He left Romania with his partner mainly for better work opportunities, thus for economic reasons, as he described them. He was 'fed up' with Romania because 'you had to know someone' in order to gain good employment (i.e. getting a job through connections, rather than a meritocratic system), a view which was shared widely amongst my participants. At the time of the interview, he worked in a 'multicultural company', with thousands of employees. He was happy with his job, describing it as easy, highly paid work. Not the humblest participant by far, he told me unprompted: 'I work on average 15 minutes a day and [...] at the end of the month I have £3,000 left'. Avram saw the UK and Norway as the only countries offering such earning prospects in his field.

Although he did not experience hate crimes, discrimination incidents were not unfamiliar to him. At work and beyond, Avram was subject to many jokes and attitudes, based on the fact he was born in Romania. As with the majority of participants, associations with the Roma made Avram feel insulted. For example, one such incident he recalled was: '[Colleagues tell] bad jokes, in general [...] of course, they begin with "talk to the gypsy if you need any-

thing" or things like that.' He then underlined how the Romanian nationality was always mentioned when talking about them in the press, although emphasising the nationality did not apply to other migrant groups: 'When it is about Romanians, it is not about a 'European citizen' so to speak, like they say about Asians. No, it is a Romanian'. Avram described how the role of Romanians as scapegoats in the UK is only temporary, part of a cycle of migrant stereotyping. He thus was confident that, with years passing by, Romanians' situation in the UK would significantly improve. Most participants perceived this issue in similar terms:

[The UK] *it's like the church, where the devil is guilty of everything. [...] Eastern Europeans who come and steal and so on. Five, ten years ago, there were the Poles, the Poles who came over and so on. Now, it's Romanians and Bulgarians. In five years' time, let's say, if Turkey joins the EU, there will be the Turks who do this and that. Thirty years ago, it was the Pakistanis. The devil will always exist, it is the local Satan, and the one we blame for whatever is going wrong. We [Romanians] have this role for the moment.*

When prompted about the negative experiences with British people at work, Avram stated there were mixed reactions. His accounts are illustrative of another theme in the data, which is the role of contacts in shaping attitudes<sup>39</sup>:

[There are] *the ones who look at us and say, 'this guy is appreciated by everyone in the company, he's nice, he solves all problems, Romanians are hardworking'. And then there are the others who*

<sup>39</sup> My interpretations are informed by the contact theory described in Pettigrew, "Intergroup contact theory".

*interact less with Romanians generally and then they tend to swallow everything the UKIP or Conservative party idiots say and so on. And then of course they see us in a very bad light [...]*

Although he experienced some discrimination, Avram avoided to label it as such for his individual case. In his view, discrimination was rather an issue for others, but not for himself.

*Discrimination exists, it exists. I have not been very affected by it. Without bragging too much, let's say I am the best in my department. There are 30 people there. So I have not been really affected because, in my case, the professional side compensates for all my weaker points.*

In this segment, Avram used one strategy of 'denying discrimination', described by Fox *et al*<sup>40</sup> in a paper on Romanians. Some of their participants, similar to the ones in my research, linked not feeling discriminated to their good work ethic. Nevertheless, although Avram denied discrimination at work, he still observed a typical case of discrimination in his company. He pointed out later in the interview how his British co-workers were promoted sooner than he was, despite claiming he worked harder than they did: 'When I was about to get promoted from level 2 to level 3, I got it later. Before that, some others were promoted who, honestly, they do not deserve being there, like really, [...] *they were almost completely incompetent, but...they were not Romanians.*'

But how did Avram react to these experiences? He stated discrimination was justified in certain circumstances. More precisely, discrimination was justified when the migrants refused to comply with the receiving society's cultural norms. This attitude was supported by a num-

<sup>40</sup> Fox et al, "Denying discrimination".

ber of other participants. For example, when asked to explain why he thought Britons had priority in the job market, Avram commented:

*[...] they prefer to choose someone that they know, okay, this person will be politically correct, he will not say bad things that can bring ten lawsuits on us. There is discrimination, but, unfortunately, I have to say this to you, it is quite justified. They [company] will not tell you, of course, 'I chose him instead because you are Romanian'...they will not tell you something like that.*

Avram saw Romanians as culturally different from the British. He discussed at length the lack of political correctness in fellow Romanians' speech, which affected their image at work and their prospects of employment. Learning to be politically correct meant being integrated in the British culture, something which Avram thought very few Romanian migrants achieved. Generally, participants saw Romanians as lacking integration. Particularly those from poorer backgrounds were described as segregated from British people. Discrimination thus, in their view, was understandable when migrants did not make 'efforts to integrate'. They argued against the idea that both the receiving society and migrants are active players in the process of integration, a perspective that is commonly supported by integration theorists and academics. My participants tended to adopt an individualist approach, the view that migrants are the only ones responsible for their integration. In this sense, the dominant narrative was that most British people appreciated and respected Romanians from a professional point of view, but not from a cultural one. The following quote from Avram, who was asked about how he felt at work, summarises this perspective:

*From a professional viewpoint, my colleagues see Romanians as Superman's descendants - the most incredibly hard-working, most efficient and so on. After employing me, after seeing how I work compared to the rest of my colleagues, they sought to specifically recruit Romanians. [...] Personally, I do not think they appreciate us on a cultural level. We're seen as uncivilised, we did not grow up with this political correctness thing in Romania, blah blah. 99% of our jokes insult or offend someone over here and so on. In Romania, I am sure you heard jokes about disabled people, gypsies, blondes, and so on, they are normal there. Here, it's like, [you] don't even realise you offended someone.*

Romanians' lack of integration, as a personal responsibility, was further illustrated by Avram. He referred to co-nationals' limited English knowledge and the fact they had almost entirely Romanian groups of friends. Romanians' personal choice to make co-national friends was seen as a barrier to integration:

*[Some Romanians] they do not even speak English [...] they try to learn 2-3 words to buy cigarettes or order a coffee, but they do not really bother, because they usually live inside their Romanian circles. On average, I would say 90% of Romanians' acquaintances in England are also Romanians.*

These views complemented other negative opinions of Romanians that Avram expressed, particularly Romanians' criminal behaviour. In the first minutes of our conversation, when describing his journey to the UK, he stated: 'If I liked Romanians, I would have stayed in Romania'. However, most of Avram's close friends in the UK were Romanian-born, including his wife. He was also more engaged in transnational activities than our second case

study, Medeea. He kept in touch with Romanians back home and did not plan to stay in the UK permanently. Moreover, Avram was one of the few who believed there are fewer Romanians in the UK than official statistics showed. This strongly contrasts with the large majority of my participants who thought there are 'millions' of Romanians, agreeing with some tabloids' headlines, for instance. However, his views about co-nationals were overwhelmingly negative. Avram heard from local media about crimes committed by Romanians in London: 'I cannot say I was surprised even by a little', he added. When discussing the types of Romanians who live in London, he started to describe them as following:

Some of them are begging, if you walk through London you will generally see them in the Marble Arch area, you also find them next to tube or bus stops. Some do not beg, they do all sorts of tricks. Some come, husband and wife, the husband does the tricks or small bad things, like shell games and things like that, the wives are begging or do all sorts of jobs like, today I wash dishes, tomorrow I am cleaning after clients leave, things like that. Nevertheless, Avram showed appreciation and support towards 'hard-working Romanians like him', who 'adapt' to life in the UK. Despite not having tertiary education, he used his highly-paid job as a differentiator between him and the 'lower class' of Romanians who 'refused' to integrate. In a similar way, Avram's attitudes towards the British depended on the 'type' of British person. Like with Romanians, this seemed to be a classed differentiation. For example, it was evident from the following description of British people he disliked: 'Here the Brit finishes college, lives in his mum's basement, plays on X-box and asks for benefits'. The lower education (not

going to university), lack of personal housing due to limited resources (living with parents), combined with claiming benefits and sedentary hobbies such as playing video games, are all signifiers, amongst others, constructing the 'lazy British' and 'benefit scrounger' stereotypes. These were described by a majority of my participants. Finally, yet importantly, when asked about 'ethnic minority British people', Avram was quick to correct me. Like many other Romanians in my sample, he identified Brits as whites only. Non-white Brits were certainly migrants. Britishness was thus about ethnicity, not necessarily place of birth, possession of citizenship or time spent living in a country: 'It's the same for me if your grandma came here 60 years ago, from my point of view you are Indian. They call themselves British, but they are as British as I will be in one or two years' time.'

#### **B. Medeea**

*I did not ever have problems with other nations in the same way I had with Romanians.*

*The Brit does not want to work in care [homes].*

Medeea's case contrasts with Avram's in terms of their background, but less regarding their views on discrimination and the British. A woman in her early thirties at the time of the interview, she arrived in the UK soon after Romania's Accession to the UK in 2007. She represents the 'typical' migrant who felt 'at home' in the UK: she speaks fluent English, has a British partner, plans to stay permanently in the UK and visits Romania very rarely. Unlike Avram, her reasons to migrate were not of economic nature, but cultural motivations. In fact, like a few other participants, Medeea arrived as a tourist in London and was hosted by a family friend for a few days. Although not everyone initially arrived in the UK for

holiday purposes, Medeea's story resonates with a majority of participants: the decision to stay in the UK was spontaneous, rather than economically planned, thus contrasting with Avram's case. Migrants, as all humans, are not fully rational economic beings. Despite often being assumed to be such, their purpose is not limited to 'taking British jobs and welfare', as some politicians and commentators passionately argue. While exploring London's high streets, young Medeea enjoyed 'the culture' so much that she decided to make UK her home. The freedom she felt in the UK - as opposed to needing to maintain a 'fake' image in terms of her appearance in Romania - was what ultimately made her decide to seek work in the UK:

*I liked the fact no one stared at me on the street, they were not interested that I am there. I was just one amongst many, which does not happen in Romania. If something is not right in the way you are dressed [...] everyone looks at you and judges you [...]. And that moment [was when] I decided I will remain here.*

However, even with an initial positive outlook, Medeea's journey did not lack difficulties. Despite having a degree in Mathematics and Physics from a top Romanian university, she had to 'start from the bottom'. She recalled the first months in London, when she was working in a coffee shop without an insurance number or other documentation. She was scared because police began to check businesses for illegal workers, so she quit her job and began to study for a professional qualification in care. She then started from zero as a social care worker, advancing in the sector as years passed by. She reached a managerial level at the time of the interview. However, at

no point in her journey did Medeea use her Romanian qualification. Her case illustrates the well-researched issue of Eastern EU migrant downskilling in the UK.<sup>41</sup>

Similar to Avram, throughout her years as a migrant, Medeea noted negative portrayals of Romanians in the British media, and by some British locals as well. The most common form of discrimination identified was the negative reaction when disclosing her nationality. This applied to a majority of participants who mentioned they felt discriminated. Before meeting her British partner, she used dating websites. Medeea often received negative responses when disclosing her nationality to potential dates:

*When I told them I was Romanian, the only thing young people knew about Romanians was gypsies... and they told me jokes about gypsies. Or vampires [...] I just met one single guy who knew about Ceaușescu and this was because he liked history and studied a lot of history.*

Nevertheless, despite negative stereotypes of Romanians affecting her, Medeea, as the majority in the sample, was quick to endorse negative stereotypes about co-nationals. Seeing herself as an integrated, fully functional member of society, she particularly targeted 'unintegrated Romanians'. Medeea shared Avram's view: fellow Romanians are appreciated for their work and their economic contributions to the UK, but not culturally. While Avram emphasised learning to be (or pretending to be, for that matter) politically correct as the main pillar of integration, for Medeea being integrated primarily meant showing confidence with the English language. This represented

another empirical illustration of what forms the distinction between 'us' and 'them' inside a migrant group can take.

Contrasting with Avram, who spoke Romanian every day, Medeea mentioned how she only had short conversations in Romanian 'one or two times a week'. Most of her friends were British or of other nationalities. When asked why she did not have more Romanian friends, she justified: 'I did not ever have problems with other nations in the same way I had with Romanians'. Before meeting her partner, she lived in a shared house with co-nationals. Negative experiences happened: some items, including food, were stolen from her and she was labelled 'a prostitute' just because she earned more money than her housemates. These negative encounters prompted Medeea to 'avoid Romanians'. Nevertheless, as most other participants, a classed distinction was drawn between Romanians whom she wanted to avoid and those she still considered becoming friends with. Her stereotype of 'low class' Romanians was illustrated in the following comments:

*I know I do not have a good opinion about Romanians [...] but the people who come here [...] the majority are not very educated [...] and they do not try to change, to integrate, to learn another lifestyle, they remain close-minded, just the same as when they left [...] They are looking for 'places in a room' ['loc in cameră' in Romanian i.e. sharing a room with one or more roommates]. I cannot understand that, how could you want a place in a room with a person you haven't met in your life, or with ten others? [...] [Interviewer: Why do you think they do that?] Because they want to save as much money as possible to go to Romania and show off.*

<sup>41</sup> For a review of the concept of downskilling, see, for example, King et al, "International Youth Mobility," 28-30.

Medeea thought that living in overcrowded houses was a choice Romanians made in order to save as much money as possible and 'show off' upon their return in Romania. Throughout the interview, she did not seem to acknowledge there were cases of Romanians who did not find themselves in poor housing for that particular reason. Similarly, not learning English was seen as strictly an individual's responsibility. In this sense, the most apparent similarity with Avram is drawn: Medeea also thought discrimination was justified in some circumstances. She thought it was common sense that the British locals 'judge' Romanians who did not speak English well:

*I know a lot of Romanians who have been here for 10, 15, 20 years and they do not speak English at all. How can you even expect not to be judged? If you do not want to live the lifestyle of the people here, you do not want to integrate, then they will judge you, of course.*

In addition to knowledge of English and living conditions, another argument for the classed differentiations is how Medeea visually described Romanians. She thought the British negatively perceive the 'visible' Romanians only, those who distinguished themselves particularly through clothing, as well as antisocial behaviour:

*The clothing style, it is very flashy, they wear stuff so people see it is branded, everywhere, those baggy jeans, cut, bleached [...] [the Romanian] buys everything which has [brand logos] on it, the biggest possible, so people can see it.*

These descriptions are consistent with Moore's findings<sup>42</sup> on what British people think of East Europeans in terms of their appearance. On

<sup>42</sup> Moore, "Shades of whiteness?"

a broader level, they also relate to the 'chav' stereotype in Britain, which is based on perceptions class.<sup>43</sup> Similar to the Romanians described by Medeea, the derogatory term 'chav' generally refers to young, and most frequently male, 'lower-class' Brits, who dress and speak loudly, and behave antisocially.

Medeea felt treated unfairly by the British who labelled her a gypsy, but at the same time she justified why some co-nationals were rightly seen negatively in the society. But what did Medeea think about the British? Similar to Avram, Medeea supported the stereotypes of British people as lazy. Speaking about the (then imminent) EU referendum, she expressed worry that she won't find trained staff in care, if fewer EU migrants were allowed in the UK after Brexit. 'The British do not want to work in care', she concluded. Before that, she described how she spoke to British people who preferred to stay on benefits instead of working in low-paid, stressful or difficult jobs. Most of my participants said they know or heard of more British people living on state benefits than Romanians. This made them believe Romanians were unfairly associated with welfare abuse in some media and political discourses in the UK.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Jones, "Chavs". Chavs tend to be described as young, white British men, who live in council homes, are usually unemployed and take social benefits. Particular (sportswear) brands and styles have been iconic for defining the 'chav' stereotype in the UK. It seems that often the 'undesirable Romanians' are described by my participants in similar terms.

### Concluding thoughts

*We are not tolerant as a nation, but we want others to tolerate us.*

The comment above was made by one of my participants. Corina, a woman in her late thirties working in London, arrived to this conclusion after encountering prejudiced Romanians. She saw 'both sides' of the story: if one wants to avoid negative experiences, such as discrimination, one has to be tolerant towards others. I deliberately included her statement in the title of this paper - Corina's thought is an oversimplified, narrow, yet indicative view on Romanians' experiences of discrimination in the UK and their own attitudes towards the people living in the receiving society.

After analysing the transcripts and observations, I could not go as far as Corina's interpretation. In any case, from a methodological point of view, qualitative data from forty-five participants cannot make such general claims. However, the data illustrated a contradictory discourse of Romanian interviewees. On the one hand, they saw themselves as victims of unfair media propaganda and often faced discriminatory experiences in employment circumstances or simply in everyday life. On the other hand, the same Romanians who had these experiences usually stereotyped other groups. Whether the views expressed in the were shaped by 'double standards', were a reaction to feeling discriminated, emerged from essentialist views, were consequences of negative experiences, post-communist ideologies, or a mix of all those factors is opened to debate.<sup>44</sup>

The two paragraphs above were adapted from

<sup>44</sup> Discussing those potential influences in detail goes beyond the scope of this paper. However they merit further investigation.

my dissertation's conclusion. After looking again at the data and analysis for writing this paper, one explanation stood out. Perhaps Romanians' attitudes were not so contradictory after all when a class dimension is taken into account. Participants did not merely endorse the stereotypes about Romanians as a migrant group (such as being culturally different, criminal, et cetera). They accepted the stereotypes for a 'low class' category of Romanians, for a 'Romanian other', and not for 'those like them'. As the two case studies illustrated, discrimination was justified for particular sub-groups of 'unwilling to integrate' Romanians, and it was unacceptable in regards to hard-working, well-paid, English speaking, functional and 'participating' members of society as they perceived themselves to be. Following a similar logic, those white, middle-class Britons were generally positively seen by my participants. However, the perspectives changed when it was about the British who apply for state benefits, those who do not follow an acceptable lifestyle in participants' views, or those from racial, ethnic and religious minorities. Perhaps labelling findings as 'attitudes towards the British' and 'attitudes towards co-nationals' was the first limitation. This disabled a comprehensive picture on attitudes towards different types of people, who are situated inside a symbolic space which we, sometimes unhelpfully, label as a group. Seeing those attitudes and stereotypes through a class discourse transcends group labelling and makes it comparable with other migrant-local relations.

At the same time, categories taken for granted, such as 'the higher educated, the less prejudiced', have to be seen critically too. As illustrated throughout the data, participants' self-perception of worth was more important

than formal education in shaping their views. Avram, like other participants, did not have a degree, but he criticised his co-nationals with the same education level. In his view, he 'tried hard enough' to secure a well-paid job, in which formal tertiary education was not essential. In a comparable way, for Medeea, education meant knowledge of the English language and appropriate social behaviour in the UK, which did not necessarily mean a degree. The 'high-skill' and 'low-skill' categories of migrants are almost always used by the media and politicians when talking about what migrants are welcomed in a country, with a clear preference for the high-skilled. Considering that these categories are almost always solely based on the migrants' formal education level, further reflection on defining and categorising migration should be undertaken. This is particularly relevant because a migrant's degree does not lead immediately to a high-paid, desired or even satisfactory job, as Medeea's story illustrated. Yet others, such as Avram, managed to secure a highly-paid job immediately without a degree.

### Afterthought

Will these findings look similar if the study is repeated after the UK exits the EU? It is probably safe to make the assumption that negative attitudes towards migrants will be further legitimised, especially if EU regulations and recommendations regarding tolerance and diversity cease to be part of the UK's legal system. In the case of Romanians, discrimination experiences did not seem to decline after they gained full rights to work in 2014. It is unlikely their experiences will become more positive after Brexit. However, an accurate picture on how this will happen, and to what extent it will affect the relations between EU migrants and locals, is impossible to draw at this moment.

In the autumn of 2016, I followed up on some participants' stories. Romanians who did not even know who the UK Prime Minister was when we first met could be teaching UK politics at the time of our second formal conversation. From those second round of and observations, as well as informal conversations with others, it seems to me that overall Romanians have become more politically aware, engaged and prepared to apply for the proper residence documents. Looking at the record levels of permanent residency and citizenship applications, it is clear that a large proportion of EU migrants will try to remain in the UK, whatever may happen after 2019. Migrant organisations, both formal and informal, are helping EU nationals in their bureaucratic journey to secure their status in the UK. As for migrants' attitudes towards the British, it seems that the best way to relieve tensions is by meaningful contacts, through which people can challenge their stereotypical thinking, which often has its roots in lack of experience

and misinformation. A two-way conversation, in academic research as well as in everyday life, speaking to both British-born and migrants in the UK, has great potential to build a more cohesive society - even a post-Brexit one.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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