

# LOCKDOWN LIFE IN THE DIASPORA: A CASE STUDY OF THE ROMANIAN COMMUNITY IN THE UK

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## **Abstract**

This research aims to shed light on the Romanian diaspora's experience of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, a global pandemic experienced by all, yet not under the same restrictions or with the same challenges. It looks at how the Romanians rate their experience of the pandemic in the UK, while also considering the wider context of Brexit, by focusing on aspects such as level of satisfaction with governmental measures, the impact on their professional activity and the intention to return to their home country. Quantitative and qualitative questionnaires reveal that despite having gone through it far from their family and friends back in Romania, Romanians in the UK did not find the experience of the pandemic overwhelmingly negative, nor did it determine a trend of return migration, despite the broader, overlapping context of Brexit.

## **Keywords**

Brexit; Covid-19; diaspora; pandemic; Romania; UK.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

At the beginning of 2020, news of a new virus started to emerge from Wuhan, China and soon enough, Europe registered its first cases of what would become the Covid-19 pandemic, an unprecedented challenge for the modern world at

international, national, as well as at a very granular, personal level. As governments struggled to limit its deadly effects and contain the pandemic, individuals saw their rights restricted and their personal and professional lives having to adapt to this new scenario.

Covid restrictions were difficult for all, limiting rights and liberties, including interactions with those making up the social support systems, such as family and friends, with lockdowns putting up invisible barriers, despite the short distances. However, for those in the diaspora, the situation was even more complex, as international travel restrictions made it difficult and at times, impossible, to come back to Romania and visit their friends and family.

For the Romanian diaspora in the UK, the period was even more challenging, as the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world and, implicitly, the UK, just as they were finally understanding what Brexit meant for the UK, the EU, and their future as EU citizens in the UK, thus adding an extra-layer of complexity to the already challenging context.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Considering the previously painted context, this paper seeks to describe the experience of Covid-19 in the diaspora by responding to the research question of how have Romanians in the UK experienced the pandemic? To address this research question, the paper uses subsequent questions looking at the level of satisfaction with the manner in which the host and origin country authorities handled the pandemic, at any experienced accounts of discrimination, at any impact on their professional activity and at the intention to return to their home country.

The aim of the paper is to offer a deeper understanding of how the pandemic was experienced by the Romanians living in the UK, since this community had to weather a particularly challenging context, as the Covid-19 outburst overlapped with the transition period, the last stage of the UK's departure from the European Union. In painting this picture, the paper seeks to work under the hypothesis that *the experience of Covid-19 was difficult for the Romanian diaspora in*

*the UK* and focuses on understanding whether this was the case and if so, to describe the difficulties while exploring whether this experience prompted a preference for return migration amongst the studied population.

To achieve these aims, the paper uses an analysis of official documents to describe the measures taken in both the host (UK) and home (Romania) countries, then discusses both quantitative and qualitative data obtained by applying two questionnaires, as explained in detail in the chapters below.

### **3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA IN THE UK IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

#### **3.1. The Romanian Diaspora in the UK**

An imagined community just like any other diaspora (Anderson 2006, 6), the Romanian one in the UK is an interesting case-study, as it has displayed impressive positive dynamics in the past years, when it became the largest EU diaspora in the UK. According to official data provided by the Home Office in their EU Settlement Scheme Quarterly Statistics from September 2022, there were 1,355,870 applications from Romanian citizens, who have applied for residence in the UK, whether under the form of Settled or Pre-Settled Status. These figures describe the Romanian diaspora as the largest EU diaspora in the UK, bigger than the Polish one, which had traditionally been the largest.

At the time of data collection, namely December 2020 and August 2021, there were 836,980 and 1,082,260 registered applications from Romanian citizens and the Polish diaspora was still the largest EU one. Romanian and Polish applications have consistently represented the highest number of applications throughout the scheme.

This growth of the Romanian diaspora, even after Brexit and the experience of a global pandemic, paints a picture of resilience and most likely, of a well-integrated community, alongside of a particular appeal of the UK, that works as a powerful pull-factor for migration.

### 3.2. The Experience of the Pandemic in the UK

On the 11th of March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic (see Cucinotta and Vanelli 2020, 157).

Globally, there has been a broad range of government responses to the rapid spread of the pandemic, including “school closings, travel restrictions, bans on public gatherings, emergency investments in healthcare facilities, new forms of social welfare provision, contact tracing and other interventions to contain the spread of the virus, augment health systems and manage the economic consequences of these actions” (Hale, Angrist, and Goldszmidt 2021, 529).

The UK’s initial response to the global pandemic was criticised by many for being too relaxed and slow at the beginning. Having initially only encouraged the population to limit non-essential contact and travel on the 16th of March 2020, British PM of the time Boris Johnson announced the first UK lockdown on 23 March, which came into force 3 days later, forcing people to ‘stay at home’. All non-essential businesses were closed and people were only allowed to leave the house for essential purposes such as medical reasons or to buy food.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, the UK Government extended the lockdown by at least three weeks and only announced a plan to lift it on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, allowing people who cannot work from home to return to work, but encouraging them to avoid public transport. Residents in the UK were also allowed to leave home for outdoor recreation, which was no longer limited to physical exercise.

June brought several relaxation measures, from the phased re-opening of schools on the 1<sup>st</sup> to the reopening of non-essential shops on the 15<sup>th</sup> in England, culminating with the PM announcing on the 23<sup>rd</sup> a general relaxation of restrictions and a 2m social distancing rule. People still had to be home overnight, but the restriction on leaving home was otherwise lifted. Nonetheless, June also brought the first local lockdown, in Leicester and surrounding area. Restrictions continued to be eased throughout the summer, with pubs, restaurants, hairdressers and indoor theatres reopening and the Government supporting the industry with a Eat Out to Help Out scheme, which offered a 50% discount for meals up to £10 per person.

However, September brought a return of restrictive measures: on the 14<sup>th</sup>, social gatherings of more than six persons were banned in England and on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, authorities imposed a 10pm curfew for the hospitality sector and announced a return to working from home.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, the PM announced a second lockdown for England to come into force on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, with the aim of lifting pressure off the NHS. Non-essential businesses were once again closed and the Government introduced the concept of a 'support bubble' for specific categories of residents, which linked two households, but outside which interaction was, once again, prohibited indoors. However, UK residents were allowed to meet one person from outside their support bubble outdoors.

That December, only three households were able to meet during the Christmas period, despite the lockdown being lifted on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Stricter rules and restrictions were in force on a regional basis, including for the London area.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2021, England entered its third lockdown, with rules that resembled the first one more than the second and residents being told to stay at home. Support bubbles were still permitted for those eligible and religious services and small weddings were allowed.

February brought strict hotel quarantine rules for travellers arriving in England from high-risk countries, but brighter news for UK residents, as on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the PM published a roadmap for lifting the lockdown.

In Step 1 of the roadmap, primary and secondary schools reopened in England, outdoor gatherings of six people or two households were allowed and staying at home was no longer mandatory, although the authorities encouraged the population to stay local.

Come Step 2, in April, many facilities reopened, including non-essential shops, hairdressers, libraries, museums, outdoor pubs and restaurants, zoos, theme parks and indoor gyms. Nonetheless, different households were still not allowed to mix indoors. This changed in May, as part of Step 3, when six people or two households were once again allowed to meet indoors and gatherings of up to 30 people were permitted outdoors. Pubs, restaurants and cinemas also reopened.

Summer was described by Step 4 of the relaxation roadmap, when, as the Government accelerated the vaccination programme, it also lifted restrictions for weddings and funerals, removed the remaining limits for social contact and reopened those sectors that were still closed, including nightclubs.

Looking back at the experience of the pandemic in the UK, the most important measures, that would have had the greatest impact on the Romanian diaspora's lives, can be summed up under gathering restrictions, movement restrictions or business restrictions.

Full national lockdowns translated into an almost total ban on social gatherings. People who did not live together were not considered to be part of the same household and were therefore, prevented from meeting. Exceptions and slight relaxations included versions of a rule of six, which allowed gathering of up to six people.

Movement restrictions translated into lockdowns prohibiting people from leaving their homes without a 'reasonable excuse'. They also aimed to prevent UK residents from travelling outside their local area, including through restrictions strictly prohibiting travel between specified areas with different, harsher restrictions in place.

International travel was prohibited during national lockdowns by a ban on leaving the UK and remained challenging even outside lockdowns, as specific quarantine and testing rules applied to international travellers, whether British residents or not. These travel restrictions were mirrored by the rest of the European countries, as the "European Centre for Prevention and Control assessed the risk for people traveling within the EU as high especially from United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Netherlands" (Gherghel and Bulai 2020, 1).

Finally, but no less important, business restrictions meant that many businesses, categorised as 'non-essential', were required to close during the pandemic, whether entirely or partially. Cinemas and hairdressers closed entirely and so did hotels, except for certain permitted activities. Restaurants and cafes were only allowed to stay open for processing takeaways and non-essential retailers were only allowed to process online orders.

### 3.3. The Experience of the Pandemic in Romania

Meanwhile, back in their home country, the Romanian authorities declared State of Emergency for 30 days on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, two days after the Government had ordered all schools to close. The State of Emergency restricted numerous rights through Decree no. 195/2020, including the right to free movement, the right to intimate, family and private life, the right to education, the right to free gatherings and the economic liberty of the individuals.

Gherghel and Bulai (2020, 1) consider the Romanian health system a vulnerable one, alongside other Eastern European systems, and stress the Government priority of managing the health risk posed by the large Romania diaspora (approximately 5 million people), constantly and often travelling from countries with a high rate of infections, such as Italy, Spain or the UK.

The State of Emergency was enforced through Numerous Military Ordinances, gradually restraining the afore mentioned rights, from closing restaurants and bars to suspending flights between Romania and certain European destinations, including the UK, and to enforcing the first lockdown though limiting interaction to a group of maximum 3 outside and introducing fines for those travelling at night, with a few exceptions such as medical emergencies or work. By the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, persons over 65 were only allowed to leave the house between certain time intervals and all those going outside needed to have an affidavit stating their reason for being outside, whether for their commute to work, grocery shopping, medical emergencies or physical activity.

12 Military Ordinances later, the State of Emergency ended on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, opening the road for a summer with fewer restrictions. Autumn, however, brought new restrictions, with restaurants, cinemas and theatres closing once again on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October and schools returning to online from the 9<sup>th</sup> of November until February.

The following summer brought even more relaxation than the previous one, with the introduction of the EU Green Certificate attesting vaccination or a negative test facilitating cultural and entertainment to take place with up to 1000 participants outdoor and bars, nightclubs and restaurants reopening, yet at limited capacity and only for those with a Green Certificate. These measures

were introduced on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2021 and two months later, the number of persons who can attend outdoor events was raised to 75 000, and 2 500 for indoor.

#### **4. IN FIGURES: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, AS EXPERIENCED BY THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA IN THE UK, AT THE END OF THE TRANSITION PERIOD**

The quantitative data discussed in this paper were collected as part of a broader survey and research endeavour, in December 2020, after the conclusion of Brexit, in the last days of the transition period scheduled to conclude at the end of the month. The subset of Covid-19 related questions fit into a broader survey that sought to describe the Romanian diaspora's experience of Brexit.

The questionnaire was applied online and disseminated through Facebook groups, which allowed a purposive targeting of specific groups within the diaspora, based on location or occupation. This limited some of the drawbacks of using a voluntary sample, making the sample more representative of the studied population, since the groups allowed me to address Romanians working in the health, agricultural, construction and services sectors, identified by the Romanian Embassy in London as "labour market sectors with a deficit" (Ambasada României în Regatul Unit al Marii Britanii și Irlandei de Nord, „Despre comunitate”), as well as IT, academia or the cultural sectors.

The same dissemination method allowed me to reach Romanians living all across the UK, including from the areas indicated by the Romanian Embassy in London as areas with important communities (Ambasada României în Regatul Unit al Marii Britanii și Irlandei de Nord, „Scurtă descriere a comunității românești din Regatul Unit”). Therefore, I particularly targeted Romanian living in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Bristol for England, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen for Scotland, Belfast and Ballymena for Northern Ireland and Newport, Cardiff and Swansea for Wales.



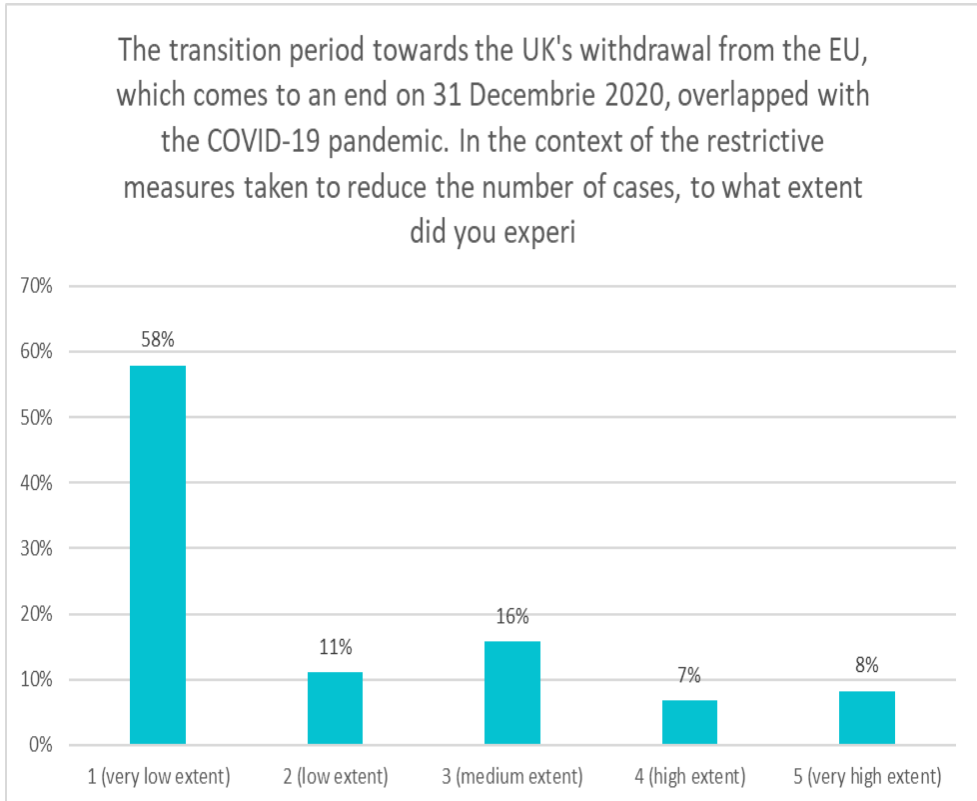
The surveyed population was asked to answer a set of questions using a Likert scale to rank from a *Very low extent* to a *Very high extent* their thoughts and experience of the pandemic, in the wider context of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. 278 people answered the questionnaire following the dissemination on Facebook groups.

In terms of age distribution, the sample was dominated by the intervals making up the active population, whether at the beginning of their professional journey, including the 7% who were students (12% of the respondents were in the 18-25 age group) or already active on the labour market (the 25-65 intervals have dominated both samples, adding up to 88). To further demonstrate that the sample is relevant for the studied diaspora, described by the Romanian Foreign Ministry as a well-integrated and economically active one, 68% of the respondents were employed full-time and a further 7% were employed part-time. 7% were unemployed and looking for a job, while the rest were active as carers, unqualified workers or students. Gender distribution was balanced, with slightly more female respondents (58%).

#### 4.1. Experiencing a change in the way one is treated in the context of the Pandemic

The debut of the Covid-19 pandemic overlapped with the transition period towards the UK's withdrawal from the EU, so, just as the transition period was shortly about to come to an end, on 31 December 2020, the questionnaire sought to see if this overlap had any influence on how the Romanian diaspora was treated in the UK in the context of these overlapping phenomena.

The first question of the set specifically asked about the extent to which one has experienced a change in the way he/she, as a Romanian citizen, was treated by the British in the context of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. The results were positive, with 58% only experiencing a change to a 'very low extent'. However, 7% experienced it to a 'high extent', while 8% to a 'very high extent', indicating some difficulties, if not discrimination, experienced by some members of the Romanian diaspora.



**Figure 1.**

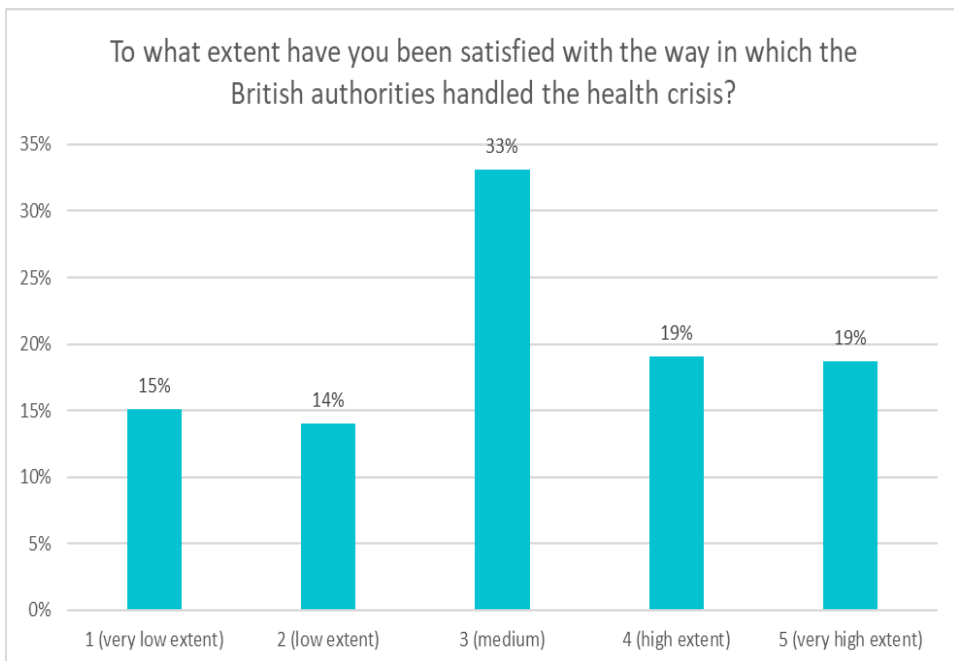
#### 4.2. Satisfaction with the authorities' handling of the crisis

The next questions sought to see whether the diaspora benefitted from being abroad or whether they would have preferred to go through the pandemic in their own country. For this reason, the respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the way in which the British and Romanian authorities handled the health crisis.

Romanians were overall moderately satisfied with the way the British authorities handled the health crisis, with 33% reporting a 'medium extent'. 19%

were satisfied to a 'very high extent' and a further 19% to a 'high extent', thus slightly tilting the balance right, towards a positive impression. However, 15% were only satisfied to a 'very low extent' and another 14% to a 'low extent', indicating there was some dissatisfaction with the manner in which the British authorities handled the pandemic.

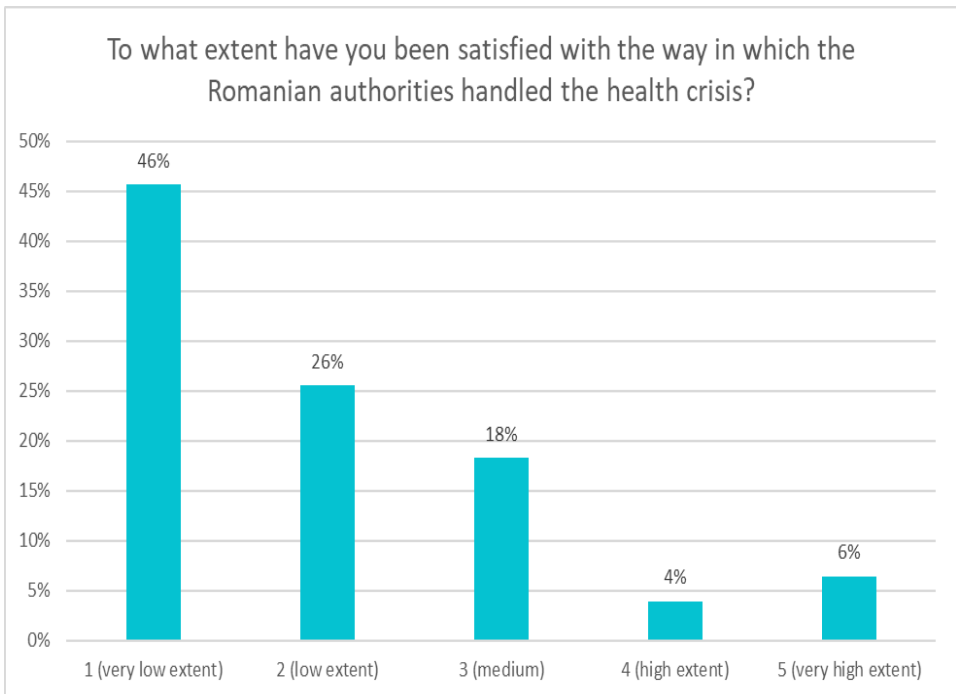
Nonetheless, only 14% of those who were dissatisfied with the way the British authorities handled the pandemic situation stated later on, while replying to another question, that the pandemic has determined them to want to come back to Romania to a 'high' or 'very high' extent. For 73% of those who were dissatisfied, their plans and intentions to stay in the UK remain unchanged.



**Figure 2.**

The prior conclusions are further supported by the question measuring satisfaction with how the Romanian authorities have handled the health crisis.

46% are only satisfied to a 'very low extent', while another 26% are satisfied to a 'low extent'. The level of satisfaction with the Romanian authorities is far lower than the one with the British, as only 6% are satisfied with the Romanians' performance to a 'very high' extent (in comparison to the 19% who are satisfied with the British).



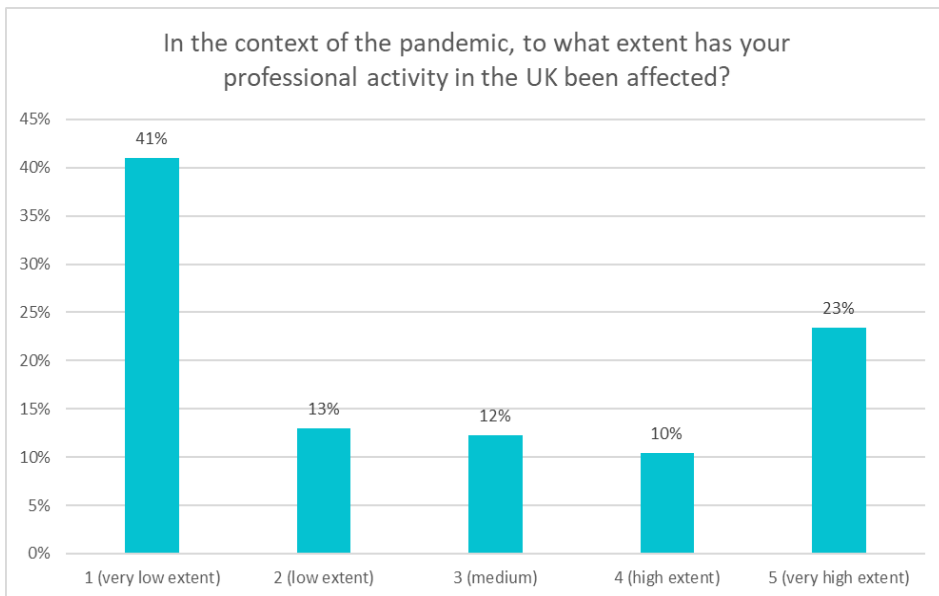
**Figure 3.**

#### 4.3. Impact on professional activity

This question sought to see how the Romanian diaspora's professional activity in the UK was affected, depending on the sector in which they were working in. As such, the 41% who stated that their activity has only been affected to a 'very low extent' are overwhelmingly working full time, predominantly in sectors

such as health, constructions, services or IT. At the very opposite, the 23% who have been affected to a 'very high extent' are a mix between full time employees, unemployed looking for a job and students, working in sectors such as hospitality, tourism, education, constructions, services, health.

Unsurprisingly, those without a stable job were more affected by the pandemic than those with a full time one. Certain sectors, such as hospitality or tourism, were also much more affected than health or constructions. However, there were also workers in the latter sectors who reported that their professional activity has been affected to a 'very high extent', suggesting that although one can observe certain patterns amongst different sectors, there will be outliers to which these patterns do not apply.

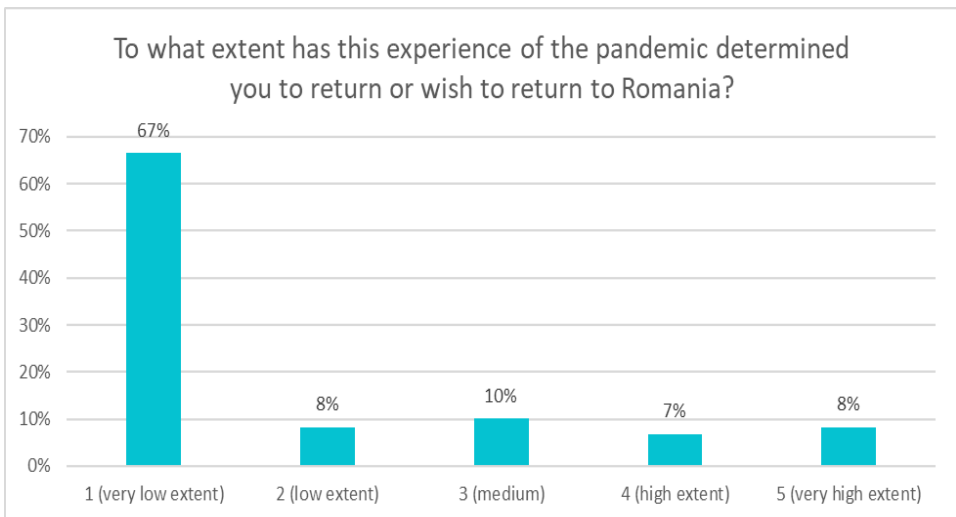


**Figure 4.**

#### 4.4. The pandemic playing a role in determining the diaspora to return to Romania

The last question of the set and of the 2020 questionnaire looked at whether the pandemic determined the Romanians in the UK to return or wish to return to Romania. For a large majority of 67%, the experience of the pandemic did not determine them to want to return.

However, 8% stated that the pandemic contributed to a 'very high extent' to them returning or wanting to return to Romania. Out of this 8%, 61% had already stated earlier on the questionnaire, answering a question related to their level of integration and intention to remain, that they are considering returning to Romania to a 'very high extent', but there were also respondents who did not report that at the beginning, yet were more favourable to the option when considering it in light of the pandemic.



**Figure 5.**

## 5. IN WORDS: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, AS EXPERIENCED BY THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA IN THE UK

The following year, at the end of August 2021, I used another questionnaire, this time with qualitative questions, but with the overall same focus of the Romanian diaspora's experience of Brexit, as a vehicle to also address a few questions on Covid-19 and the experience of these two overlapping events. By then, Romanians in the UK had experienced three lockdowns and were starting to see an increased, but not a fully resumed liberty to travel with the red, amber and green country codes part of the Roadmap out of Lockdown.

The sample was a convenience and snowball one, with 10 respondents and a true gender balance, 5 female and 5 male respondents. In terms of sample distribution, they were between 26 and 30 years old, 7 were living in London, 1 in Manchester, 1 in Portsmouth and 1 in Colchester. Highly educated, 6 had completed postgraduate studies and 4 had Bachelor degrees. 3 were working in the IT sector, 2 in the legal sector, 1 in the financial one, 1 in marketing, 1 in tourism, 1 was a UK civil servant and another one was working for the MET police.

They were asked to fill in an open-ended questionnaire available on Google Forms and answers were then codified and analysed using the Atlas.ti tool. Unlike the qualitative data, this particular set is less statistically relevant, but analysed jointly, provides context and possible explanations for the quantitative data previously outlined.

This qualitative questionnaire sought to identify any effects that the pandemic might have had on the Romanian diaspora's professional activity in the UK and their reflections on this period.

The respondents to this research were less affected by the pandemic, as most have managed to keep their jobs, while either working from home or adapting to the new pace and scenarios. Four persons specifically stated that it has had no impact on their own professional lives, and that they have been able to work from home, one of them even having *"the privilege of being promoted this year"*. However, another respondent highlighted that even though it did not have a

personal effect, *“in general, job opportunities have decreased drastically, as most companies, regardless of their sector, estimated reduced incomes and took the decision to reduce costs in various categories, including employment”*. Two others reported that *“it was and still is difficult to find a job during the pandemic”* or that while they were able to continue to work full-time, they did not have the *“possibility to change jobs, as tourism had been severely affected by the pandemic”*.

On the other hand, four participants reported having shifted to working from home for all or *“most of the time”*, which allowed them to keep their jobs, but also have *“more freedom of movement, not being tied to my office. I was able to travel to Romania for a longer period of time”*, thus emphasising one benefit of the pandemic for Romanians in the UK.

The second question actually sought to explore whether Romanians found the pandemic easier or harder to get through as part of the diaspora. The replies were highly nuanced and included various answers. Two respondents thought that it would have *“depended on several variables”*. As one of them explained, *“I would have probably had a different perspective on this period if I was still living in Romania, as I would have had to continue to work, which would have exposed me to a higher risk of catching Covid-19. The restrictions imposed in the UK have massively reduced social interaction and, as a consequence, the possibility to get infected, at least in my case, an aspect which would have been different had I continued to live in Romania (where the social interaction with members of my family, friends would have continued despite the restrictions)”*.

And yet another participant had a totally opposite view on the UK restrictions: *“It was harder in the UK. Restrictions were more relaxed in Romania.”* Four other participants join in thinking that getting through the pandemic would have been easier in Romania, with three quoting that they would have been closer to their families as the main motive.

Two believe that it would have been the same, although one did mention being aware of the fact that *“many Romanians who are living in the UK have been way more affected than I was”*, since having lived in the UK for over 7 years and having a nice landlord were both useful advantages. Only one respondent thought that it the pandemic period would have been harder elsewhere and not as part of the diaspora, but offered no details regarding why.



## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Although experienced far from any possible support bubble back home and during the wider, more complex context of Brexit, the pandemic was a predominantly positive, yet diverse experience for different members of the Romanian community in the UK, with reported experiences varying from positive to negative in both the qualitative and quantitative studies.

15% of the respondents to the quantitative study experienced a change in the way they, as Romanian nationals, were treated in the context of the two overlapping events. However, over half of those surveyed only experienced a change to a very low extent, which paints a positive picture for the majority in terms of possible discrimination or negative attitudes. Their professional activity was again, differently affected, depending on the nature of the job. Those working full time, in sectors which allowed a swift transition to working from home (IT) or were exempt from restrictions (health, constructions), were the least affected, although reported exceptions exist. Those without a stable job were the most affected, especially if they worked in the hospitality and tourism industry.

These trends were further confirmed and contextualised by the qualitative data, where respondents highlighted a severe negative effect for the tourism sector, while also mentioning positive singular experiences, such as being promoted. Interestingly, one respondent saw the possibility of working from home as an opportunity to travel to Romania for a longer period of time and spending more time with friends and family, in a contrasting trend than the one suggested by the movement restrictions described in the literature review part.

In terms of satisfaction with the authorities' handling of the crisis, Romanians preferred the British approach, despite it including more lockdowns than in the Romanian case, as presented at the beginning of this paper. A clear majority of almost 70% reported no interest in returning to Romania, in light of their recent experience of the pandemic as part of the diaspora. Only 8% stated that the pandemic determined them to either return or wish to return to a very high extent and a further 7% to a high extent, thus, once again, demonstrating a positive general trend, but varying experiences.

Looking back at the hypothesis this paper started from, which expected a difficult experience of the Covid-19 pandemic for the Romanian diaspora in the UK, we can hardly say this was the case for the majority. However, this descriptive study manages to reveal the diverse experiences and their specific characteristics, painting a complex picture of the experienced reality, which varies from overall positive to neutral and finally, negative. It is notable that there was no predominant trend for return migration, a tendency backed by official statistics, which saw Romanians becoming the largest EU diaspora in the UK from 2020 to 2022. These figures support the findings and demonstrate a resilient, well-integrated community, ready to face not only Brexit, but also any other subsequent challenges, including a health crisis.

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