WILL ROMANIANS COLONIZE BRITAIN?

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Abstract: By convention, identity is shaped by the meanings assigned to phenomena, the common idea shared by a group of people about the national symbols, geography, values and attitudes, habits and behavior, language and achievements. This paper investigates the perceptions of Romanian students regarding values and attitudes considered to be British and attempts to find out if life in the UK is considered attractive enough to trigger a serious migration to the isles.

Keywords: identity, social norms, student talk

Introduction

Recent reports in the media focus on the issue of how the British authorities and public opinion are concerned with the status of Romanian and Bulgarian citizens that should be granted limited rights and employment opportunities in the UK. The British seem to worry about a possible colonization by the Eastern Europeans, even if the number of Romanians that seek employment and a new life on the British Isles has not increased significantly over the past few months. Although living conditions are challenging in present day Romania, the number of migrants to the UK does not appear to soar. The promise of a better future might appeal to the younger generations and this is why in this paper we present some of the conclusions drawn about this issue. A group of 80 students, aged 18 – 21 were interviewed about how they view the prospect of migrating to the UK to start a new professional/personal life away from home.

A psychological sense of community

A study carried out in 2005 attempted to identify what the inhabitants of the British Isles regard to be *British*, in terms of behaviors, success stories and attitudes (http://www.ethnos.co.uk/pdfs/9_what_is_britishness_CRE.pdf). The study aims at finding out what makes Britain's multicultural society cohesive and successful. In this paper we try to identify some of the processes through which perceptions of the notion of *Britishness* are told, maintained and challenged by a group of Romanian students. The question of shared perceptions and beliefs should give some indication about how social identity and group perceptions are shaped in a fragile global community.

Globalization is supposed to bring the world closer together. According to the online version of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, globalization refers to "the development of an increasingly integrated global economy" where trade and capital flow are free. Globalization also means "the tapping of cheaper foreign labor markets" (http://www.merriam-webster.com). Compliance with EU regulations made the British authorities worry about an expected 'flood' of Romanians that would (supposedly) create problems. In 2014, British newspapers report a number of approximately 500 Romanian rough sleepers on the streets of London, in a context where more than half of the homeless population in England is said to come from overseas countries. Dr. Ion Jinga, Ambassador of Romania to the UK voiced his concern about what is perceived as the Romanian invasion in an article published online. The August 2013 report of the Office for National Statistics (www.ons.gov.uk) states that approximately 158.000 Romanian and Bulgarians are born resident in the UK. The same report states that the end of the labor market restrictions "could impact migration flows to the UK". There seems to be a discrepancy between the amount of concern and the relatively small number of Romanians that may or may not visit or settle in the UK: the "… figures for year ending December 2012 show the number of UK residents who were born abroad was

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7.7 million, of those; 5.0 million came from outside the EU and the remaining 2.6 million from within the EU". Non-EU and Non-UK numbers prevail among the holders of British citizenship.

All these and other factors create a sense of psychological unease when it comes to how we, Romanians are perceived in the UK and also globally. But do we really intend to initiate a Romanian conquest that could link the isles more closely with a *global* Europe and world? What are the perceptions of the young generation about the British and how strongly motivated are they to pursue happiness across the Channel?

National identity and the sense of belonging to a certain group of people within given geographical boundaries have been changing in what has been called a globalizing world (Bal and Willems, 2014). From a psychological point of view, the emotional climate in groups and the subjective perception of belonging to a community are critical in order to establish a rapport between people and their living surroundings/environment. It is a subjective matter that includes membership, power; the satisfaction of one's needs and shared history and participation. Sarason argued that a feeling of belonging to a community helps individuals define their identities (Sarason, 1974). McMillan & Chavis (1986) went on to include the notion of commitment in defining community. More recent research suggests that the notion of conscious identification be included in the definition. Taking into consideration the general theoretical framework, a study was initiated to determine how well-anchored are Romanian students in their native land and if/how they are motivated to migrate to the UK.

Perceptions of *Britishness*

In the course of our investigation, a word association task and sentence completion tasks were administered. The word association task was aimed at discovering which ideas and thoughts Romanian students have about life in Great Britain. The sentence completion task enabled students to express themselves freely on a number of topics, such as: what they know about the UK, what they perceive to be attractive about living in the UK, if/why they would travel to the UK. A number of questions were later addressed in order to establish the views and perceptions of Romanian students about life in Great Britain. Some of the questions asked were: What is your representation of Britishness? What are the best known British symbols? Who are the British people? What do British people value? What sort of behaviours are typically British? What sort of language(s) do the British speak? The final question they were asked to answer was if they would consider living and working in the UK for a while/permanently and for what reasons.

Interview data

Eight out of ten students interviewed believe that *Britishness* means a mixture of cultural features, characteristic of the inhabitants coming from all corners of the world that make up British society today. To them, the British are a group of people where Indians, Turks, Chinese and Africans make up a majority. One in five students identified the Welsh and the Scots as being British. There is also a clear distinction made by Romanian students between the English and the Irish and nearly a third of the interviewees claim to have friends and/or relatives living in the Republic of Ireland. The best know British symbols named by the participants were, in this order: the Queen, soccer and the pound sterling. Students also name The Beatles, The Big Ben and the kilt. In terms of typically British behaviour, students perceive fish and chips as their favourite dish, going to football matches as their preferred pastime activity and drinking beer as a common social habit. In terms of language(s) spoken, nearly all the participants reported that British English is the national language while they also mentioned that the languages spoken by different ethnic groups are also widely used. One in ten students named Gaelic to be one of the languages spoken. Students think that

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living in Britain would have advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, the price of food is perceived to be lower than in Romania and clearly better in terms of the ration between income and expenditure. Moreover, the minimum hourly wage students expect to receive in the UK amounts to 6 pounds, whereas in Romania it is much lower. On the other hand, living expenses are perceived to be higher in the UK than in Eastern Europe and students believe that the lifestyles of the two countries greatly differ. In this respect, eight in ten students would prefer the food and social customs of their native land to the blend of social and cultural traits in the UK. Nearly all interviewees agree that there are more challenges to be faced in the UK than in Romania.

Conclusions

While the data collected from the interviews has not been fully processed, the partial results we obtained seem to indicate a rather superficial knowledge on behalf of the Romanian students as regards what life in Britain could be like. Friends and family members, access to the Internet and media may help them find out more about the UK. However, most students would prefer to remain in their native land to continue their studies and then take up work. In terms of study opportunities, only one in ten students would like to study in the UK for a while or would consider participating in the Erasmus mobility programme at an institution from the UK. Overall, the interviewed group's opinion seems to be in favour of remaining in Romania. Settling in the UK would not make them happy, while traveling to London or Dublin was named by four out of five students as a holiday activity they would consider.

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