



The exploitation of Moldovan Diaspora in the UK

Briefing 2 from exploratory research into the circumstances and nature of Moldovan exploitation in the UK.¹

This briefing was developed as part of research aiming to understand Moldovan's experiences living and working in the UK, their exposure to exploitation, and their notable absence from the UK's National Referral Mechanism. Here we discuss findings from interviews with Moldovan diaspora residing in the UK.

Key findings

- The combined impact of the pandemic and the UK's departure from the EU has exacerbated concerns about the precarity of Moldovan diaspora residing in the UK on a temporary basis.
- We did not find any direct evidence of conditions that would constitute modern slavery or human trafficking. However, interview participants reported having experienced labour conditions that may amount to exploitation, including low pay and discrimination, or indicated an awareness of others that had experienced abuses.
- Those residing in the UK on short-term visas often have a limited understanding of their rights and entitlements in the UK. For example, study participants were often unaware that switching employers was not legally possible under the conditions of their temporary work visa.
- The availability of, and access to information regarding key public functions and services while in the UK was identified as a key issue by those we interviewed. Some participants indicated a reliance on friends, family, and Facebook groups in the absence of being able to find reliable information from official channels.

Why is this important?

Preliminary desk-based research and stakeholder consultations we conducted throughout 2020 and 2021 indicated a lack of data and knowledge regarding the scale and nature of exploitation involving Moldovan diaspora in the UK. Significant data-gaps currently prevent the quantification of exploitation involving Moldovan victims in the UK. The overall number of Moldovans residing in the UK is also masked, as many of those entering the UK do so legitimately as dual-nationals using Romanian passports and on short-term work visas.

For this research, we interviewed members of the Moldovan community to understand better their experiences of living and working in the UK, including their exposure to abuse and exploitation.

Recommendations

- Provision of centralised information

Our participants regularly reported having difficulty accessing up-to-date information on their rights and eligibilities, in addition to 'how-to' guidance on tax, banking access, and registering for GPs and other services. Further research should be undertaken to understand the best channels to provide such information. The extent to which communications approaches can be repurposed should also be investigated, noting that Moldovan's commonly speak Romanian.

- Ongoing analysis to understand the impact of the UK's decision to leave the EU, and the pandemic.

Participants indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic and the UK's departure from the EU had significantly changed the common demographic of diaspora, and their status, reducing opportunities for long-term residence in the UK. It is understood that this increases vulnerability to exploitation for those on short-term work visas, and for those working in sectors considered high-risk to exploitation.²

- A coordinated serious and organised crime analysis between UK and Moldovan authorities.

Our research did not identify any incidents of human trafficking or modern slavery, or information suggesting organised criminal involvement in labour exploitation. Further research is needed to understand fully the serious and organised crime landscape between the UK, Moldova, and Romania as the basis of formal cooperation between the three countries' anti-trafficking efforts.

- Pilot additional data-recording to assist in the identification of Moldovan diaspora.

Currently, information such as place of residence and country of birth are not routinely recorded by authorities who encounter victims of exploitation. A pilot scheme operated at strategic entry-points into the UK which records this information is one suggestion which we believe could go some way to developing more contextual understanding of diaspora. Such information could be used to develop more tailored and appropriate support and repatriation services for those subject to exploitation or abuse in the UK.

¹ April, 2022. This research briefing was prepared by Dr. Ben Brewster and Dr. Oana Burcu (University of Nottingham's Rights Lab), with input from Harry Dickinson (Rights Lab placement student and MA student at the University of Nottingham School of Politics and International Relations). The project 'Understanding the prevalence of Moldovan nationals in the UK National

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² The GLAA considers several sectors high-risk to labour exploitation: <https://www.glaa.gov.uk/publications/labour-exploitation/>

Research overview

Through this research, we aimed to further understand to what extent, and why Moldovan diaspora are under- and potentially misrepresented in the UK's NRM, and to uncover the nature of Moldovan employment and life in the UK.

To elicit new insights into these issues, we conducted interviews with members of the Moldovan community in London, Northampton, and Birmingham (n=10). Participants met one or both of the following criteria: 1) those with experience working in sectors considered prone to labour abuses and exploitation in the UK, 2) those playing a proactive role in the UK's Moldovan community (community organizers, faith leaders, educators, shop owners, etc.).

For those with experience working in at-risk sectors, we asked them about their experiences living and working in the UK, the challenges they faced in doing so, and their exposure to labour-rights violations and exploitation. For those in community organising and other roles, we asked about their experience of receiving questions and giving advice to other members of the community on aspects of living and working in the UK. Both groups were asked if they knew of other people who had experienced exploitation (including sexual).

Interviews were supplemented by meetings and additional interviews with a variety of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in the UK and Moldova (n=29). These consisted of people who worked for UK government, including in law enforcement and central government (n=21), in embassy or consular roles (n=3), NGOs (n=4), or working in Moldovan law enforcement (n=1).

Interview findings

Visas and legal status

Our background review found that there is not a clear estimate of the size of the UK's Moldovan diaspora (by residence or country of birth). While the Office of National Statistics estimates the presence of roughly 18,000 Moldovans in the UK by nationality,³ this figure is not recorded by country of birth or residence. It is therefore not considered an accurate metric. The true number of Moldovans residing in the UK is relatively unknown, and likely to be significantly higher than this official figure.

We do not currently have any data that shows the number of Moldovans that are travelling to the UK, and on what basis (work or visitation visas, Romanian passports, or via clandestine means) - information which would provide additional insight into their precarity, and susceptibility to exploitation.

Through our interviews with Moldovan diaspora, it was clear that there was some confusion regarding what can (and cannot) be done within the terms of temporary work visas, introduced following the UK's departure from the EU. A lawyer we interviewed indicated that they had been contacted by multiple people who were initially granted temporary visas to work in agriculture, but that were now expressing desire change their employment. It was suggested that people perceived that better paid work was available in sectors considered to be less physically demanding than agriculture. Within these reports, there was no recognition that changing employers would be a breach of their visa's terms. There is some concern that these people may eventually leave their lawful employer but continue to reside in the UK, placing them at further risk of exploitation due to the absence of legal employment rights.

Others expressed concern regarding the inflexibility of their residency status. Language requirements were also identified as an issue, as Moldova does not currently host an approved English Language Centre, meaning that those wishing to apply for UK residence must first travel to neighbouring Romania or Ukraine to take the test to comply with the necessary language criteria for a longer-term Visa.

Migration

One interviewee, a settled Moldovan living in the UK, conceptualised that the priorities of Moldovans migrating to the UK generally sat in two quite polarising positions: those migrating to study or live with their families with the aim of settling in the UK, and those aiming to make money in the short term to send home to their families in

Moldova. Several participants stressed the importance of friends and relatives as factors in their migration, less so recruitment agencies.

The combined impact of the UK's departure from the EU and the Covid-19 pandemic has complicated the circumstances for migrants in recent years, and our study participants perceived that many Moldovans had since returned home to Moldova or moved back into the EU to find work.

Some interviewees cited the UK leaving the EU as the explicit reason for this, as long-term opportunities to stay in the UK were no longer open to them. We perceive that this may have increased the proportion of Moldovans who now move to the UK on a short-term basis, and raises concerns about their financial security, the stability of their work and its conditions, and their overall quality of life - with many missing out of the benefits associated with longer-term or permanent UK residency, such as access to public funds.

Others suggested that business closures during the pandemic had significantly inhibited working opportunities causing them to return home or look elsewhere for work.

In further response to the UK leaving the EU, one participant reported being encouraged by agencies and companies to apply for settled status, while another stated that a large company owner had advised him to look for work in Ireland or elsewhere in the EU, rather than in the UK. Another participant indicated that they had heard of some failing in their attempts to enter country while travelling during the pandemic, having not understood or been fully aware of Covid-19 related travel protocols and restrictions.

Participants suggested the presence of significant Moldovan communities in London, Northampton, and Birmingham.

Working Conditions

Our interview participants did not indicate having experienced or encountered cases that would constitute modern slavery explicitly (by the UK definition). They did however report having experienced a range of labour abuses, and generally poor working conditions in several sectors. These included not being paid the minimum wage, working with no breaks, having no leave entitlement, and being subject to verbal abuse and bullying. This was reported in hotels and hospitality, the automotive industry, food processing, and in construction. One participant discussed the conditions of his partner who worked in food processing:

"You have to move very fast, many jobs are done by women, they come back home exhausted, they need to sleep a lot to recover, their wrists are overused, (they are) in pain, they often have to bandage themselves [...] they overwork you and the wages never rise."

Some participants also reported that the wages and working conditions they experienced did not match those that were initially advertised to them, suggesting that they and others within their social networks were often being paid less than expected, without overtime pay, breaks, and paid sickness leave. Others indicated that they were being paid less than English colleagues who were doing the same work or that they were allocated work that was more physically demanding than their English counterparts.

Two participants indicated that demand for their labour had increased significantly since they originally took jobs, stating that they had been told to increase the number of hours they were working, but without a rise in pay. Others discussed discrimination and verbal abuse at the hands of English and other employees and employers, particularly following the UK's departure from the EU.

No participants reported knowing of instances where people were living or working illegally.

Help and assistance

Our interview participants generally indicated that they felt 'left to their own devices' to find information on issues such as accessing core public services, and their rights and entitlements while in the UK. They suggested a general over reliance on eliciting help and information from other diaspora based on existing (in-person) social connections, church, or Facebook groups. A faith leader we interviewed also indicated that there were cultural barriers that might prevent some people from asking for help entirely:

³ Office for National Statistics, "Population Estimates," accessed January 27, 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>.

“The working class is very “descurcareti” [manage to find their way around] and very rarely speak to the priest about the problems they are facing [...] Even if they find themselves in difficult situations, they will not complain.”

Another participant suggested that without existing social connections life in the UK was isolating and at times difficult to navigate. For those without good English language skills, these problems were intensified.

Several participants indicated that they had themselves paid or were aware of others within the community charging a fee to assist with accessing National Insurance (NI), GP services and other registrations – leading some to be scammed. This issue has also been acknowledged among Romanian and Bulgarian agricultural workers in the UK.⁴ One of our participants recounted:

“People I knew who needed a NI used to go to a young lady who would charge them £200 just to register them, it was weird and many were conned because they didn’t always receive help [...] So sometimes (they) would pay certain charges but wouldn’t end up with the docs they needed [...] Even if we are to pay for a service, at least to know that you pay a set price for a secure service with specific results.”

Another recalled:

“I have heard about instances where new arrivals pay individuals certain sums of money in exchange of services like enrolment in schools, GPs etc. Some have good intentions and others less so. Some make a living out of it, it is their business, they need to make a living too [...] Information often spreads in the community so if one of these ‘people’ cons others, the word will spread and by the 3rd or 4th client, they will be out of business.”

Several participants expressed the need for more centralised (and straightforward) assistance mechanisms, frustrated at their reliance on Facebook groups, friends and family, and other diaspora (where available) to learn about how British systems work and how to navigate them.

When questioned on whether embassies were useful, participants were generally critical of the limited support offered by the Moldovan Embassy, citing it as unresponsive and that the information provided by it was limited. Opinions on the Romanian embassy were generally more favourable – as it organised cultural events and offered ‘tours’ of several UK cities where it offers services to the local community.

Agents and suppliers

We also queried participants on the extent to which they were aware of the involvement of recruitment agencies in helping to facilitate migration of Moldovans, and their recruitment into jobs in the UK.

Those we interviewed indicated that they were generally aware of agents’ involvement or had in the past been recruited by an agency themselves. However, several participants suggested that they believed that recruitment agents were now less commonly involved in facilitating migration, and that people were more inclined to rely upon social connections and family to help them move and integrate into the UK. One participant recalled:

“I hardly know anybody who came to the UK through recruitment agencies. Most people came through friends, family, and acquaintances. I brought my sister over, then her husband came.”

For those that did have, or knew of others with experience of agents, they reported high levels of dependence on the agent. One participant recalled paying an agent while seeking employment:

“(I) paid 1500 pounds to a recruitment agent, who facilitate finding a job, they [the agents] tell you what answers to give and do your CV for you.”

Others recounted anecdotes about jobs from agencies routinely not meeting their expectations in terms of pay and hours, with one even suggesting that some agencies deliberately over-recruited for positions meaning that there was not always a guarantee of working hours. Others suggested some agents discriminated based on age and that agencies were sometimes reluctant to take on older people when recruiting for manual jobs.

Conclusions

Overall, we were not able to evidence explicitly whether (or not) Moldovan diaspora is being trafficked into or exploited through modern slavery within the UK. It is clear from our small sample exploratory research however that Moldovans are impacted by macro conditions in the same ways as other diaspora groups that are commonly identified as victims of exploitation and trafficking in the UK. Participants also frequently reported that they had been exposed to sub-standard working conditions. Restrictive border and migration policies and poorly enforced labour regulations mean that those with precarious residential status, low levels of education, or who lack English language skills should be considered as extremely vulnerable to labour exploitation, and forms of modern slavery.

While it is beyond the scope of this work to discuss in detail the impact of these macro factors in detail, we do identify several, of what we consider, achievable measures to better understand and prevent exploitation in this context. These include the provision of centralised information for migrants, law enforcement cooperation between UK and Moldovan authorities, more rigorous enforcement of labour markets, and expanded work which seeks to understand the living and working experience of marginal diaspora groups

⁴ Oana Burcu, Alison Gardner, and Charlotte Gray, “Impact of Covid-19 on Romanian and Bulgarian Workers in UK Agriculture,” *Modern Slavery Human Rights Policy and*

Evidence Centre, 2021, <https://modernslaverypec.org/assets/downloads/Romanian-workers-UK-agriculture-summary.pdf>.