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DOCTORAL THESIS ABSTRACT

Policies and Mechanisms at the European Union Level in the Field of Citizen Repatriation.

Case Study: The Repatriation of Romanian Citizens in Exceptional Situations, in the Year 2020, from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represented one of the greatest global crises of the 21st century, profoundly affecting international mobility and generating unprecedented challenges for Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In 2020, both British and European authorities introduced severe restrictive measures to limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which led to restrictions on cross-border travel and considerably hindered citizens' ability to return to their country of origin.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the United Kingdom adopted a relatively lax approach; however, as the number of infection cases increased exponentially, the British government imposed travel restrictions, mandatory quarantine measures, and suspended international flights. These measures had a direct impact on Romanian citizens—affecting in particular seasonal workers, students, and tourists—who found themselves stranded in the United Kingdom without clear repatriation options. At the same time, the imposition of strict sanitary restrictions within the European Union further complicated their repatriation, resulting in a significant increase in requests for consular support.

The process of repatriating European Union citizens is an essential component of migration policies and consular protection. The European Union has developed a legal framework and operational mechanisms to facilitate the return of citizens in exceptional situations, such as humanitarian crises, conflicts, natural disasters, or emergencies. In this context, Member States cooperate both bilaterally and through European institutions to ensure the protection of their citizens.

Repatriation, in the context of the European Union and international law, refers to the process by which a country's citizens are brought back to their national territory from another country, either voluntarily or forcibly, due to exceptional circumstances. This can occur for various reasons, including humanitarian crises, armed conflicts, natural disasters, political or economic instability, medical emergencies, or legislative changes that affect the legal status of citizens in a third country. Within the European Union, repatriation is closely linked to the principle of consular protection and solidarity among Member States. According to Article 23 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), European Union citizens who are in a third country where their country of origin does not have diplomatic or consular representation have the right to request

protection and assistance from the representations of other Member States. In such cases, repatriation can be facilitated through European coordination mechanisms, such as the EU Civil Protection Mechanism or funds designated for external crises.

The distinction between voluntary repatriation and forced repatriation is essential for understanding the process. Voluntary repatriation occurs when citizens choose to return to their country of origin, usually with logistical and financial support from national or European authorities. This type of repatriation is commonly encountered among migrants in difficulty, students, or workers who can no longer continue their activities due to external factors. On the other hand, forced repatriation is imposed by authorities and may involve the expulsion of persons residing illegally in another country or the evacuation in extreme crisis situations.

In the case of Romania, the repatriation of Romanian citizens from abroad is regulated by a national legislative framework that sets forth the responsibilities of the involved institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Consular Department and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This thesis explores the interaction between European and national mechanisms, highlighting both the regulatory framework and the challenges encountered in managing repatriation, especially in crisis contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In particular, the year 2020 posed a major challenge for Member States in managing repatriations, given the global crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions imposed by most countries, logistical blockages, and the need for strict sanitary measures significantly complicated the repatriation process. The European Union played an important role in supporting this process through mechanisms such as the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and through the coordination of Member States' efforts.

This thesis makes a significant contribution both academically and practically through a detailed analysis of the policies and mechanisms of the European Union in the field of citizen repatriation, with a special focus on the case of repatriating Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020.

The research integrates both the theoretical dimension and the direct experience of the doctoral candidate as a practitioner in consular affairs, thereby offering a complex and applied approach to the issues of repatriation. On one hand, the theoretical component of the work is based on the analysis of the international, European, and national legal frameworks, as well as on the study of

the institutional and operational mechanisms that regulate and facilitate citizen repatriation. This theoretical component ensures a detailed understanding of the concept of repatriation, the fundamental rights of European citizens, the triggering factors for repatriation, and the relevant public policies.

The candidate's direct experience as a practitioner in consular assistance and protection—through his activities at the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, within the Special Situations Group (GSD), and at the Romanian Consulate General in London—adds a pragmatic and concrete perspective on how these mechanisms are applied in practice. This expertise enables a critical evaluation of how European and national legislation and policies are implemented in real repatriation situations, highlighting both the strengths and the deficiencies or challenges encountered in managing such operations.

By combining these two approaches, the work blends normative analysis with observations and conclusions derived from practical experience, offering a balanced and well-founded perspective on the issues of repatriation. The case study on the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020 is thus contextualized not only with respect to existing theories and applicable policies but also through the direct experience of the author, who was actively involved in managing similar situations. This combination of theory and practice allows not only for testing and validating existing conceptual frameworks but also for formulating proposals to improve institutional and operational mechanisms, thereby contributing to the development of the field and increasing the efficiency of future repatriation processes.

The subject of repatriation is relatively underexplored in the specialized literature, and this thesis stands out due to several innovative elements. The proposed analysis addresses the phenomenon of repatriation in a multidimensional manner, correlating legal aspects with political, economic, and social ones. Another distinctive element is the integration of an empirical perspective based on the author's direct experience within the Special Situations Group of the Consular Department, thus providing access to concrete data, participation in events, evacuation actions, and relevant case studies. In addition, the research proposes to test existing theories and conceptual frameworks in the context of an applied case study—namely, the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the

United Kingdom during a period marked by overlapping crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit.

The repatriation process is regulated by a complex legal framework that includes both international legislation and European and national regulations. At the international level, the conventions of the United Nations, the legal framework of the International Organization for Migration, and the regulations of the World Health Organization play an important role in managing situations that require emergency repatriation. At the European level, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the role of the European External Action Service are essential for coordinating among Member States. At the national level, Romanian legislation in the field of protecting citizens abroad, together with the institutions involved in managing repatriation, contributes to the implementation of these policies and to adapting them to the specific realities of each crisis.

The theoretical framework of repatriation has been significantly influenced by recent international, European, and national events. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of citizens abroad and necessitated rapid repatriation measures, requiring complex coordination among the Member States of the European Union. Brexit generated legal and social uncertainties for Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom, leading to an increase in repatriation requests and the need for efficient consular protection mechanisms. In the period 2021–2023, conflicts in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, and natural disasters, such as the earthquake in Turkey, have demonstrated the importance of efficient European mechanisms for the evacuation and protection of citizens.

The structure of the thesis follows a logical approach, starting from general concepts regarding repatriation and the European regulatory framework, and progressing to the analysis of a concrete case study. This methodology allows for a progressive understanding of the phenomenon and provides a clear framework for interpreting the results. The proposed research thus offers an original perspective on the repatriation process, contributing to the development of knowledge in the fields of European affairs, foreign policy, and citizen protection in crisis contexts.

This thesis is based on both a series of policies and mechanisms implemented at the European Union level for managing the repatriation of citizens in exceptional situations, and on strategies derived from the existing national regulatory framework in Romania.

Over the years, the European Union, through the European Commission, the European External Action Service, and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, has developed a legislative and operational framework intended to support Member States in repatriation actions, especially in crisis contexts, whether economic, humanitarian, or sanitary (Carrera, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of these mechanisms by revealing both the strengths and the vulnerabilities of the repatriation process at the European level (Barbier-Gauchard et al., 2021). Furthermore, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism has been recently strengthened to improve the capacity to react to emergencies, including in terms of citizen repatriation (Robu, 2024).

Romania, as a Member State of the European Union, benefits from these common policies, but also implements its own repatriation strategies through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its diplomatic missions. The year 2020 was marked by significant challenges, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was a major destination of interest, especially in light of Brexit and the global health crisis (Wright et al., 2020; Beaucillon, 2020). The repatriation of Romanian citizens in exceptional situations in this context was a highly debated subject, bringing to the forefront both bilateral cooperation and the support offered by European mechanisms.

Previous studies have highlighted the complexity of the repatriation process, emphasizing the need for a balance between national sovereignty and European solidarity (Sangiovanni, 2013; Guild and Minderhoud, 2011). Moreover, specific cases of repatriation, such as those from conflict zones or after natural disasters, have been analyzed; however, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new dimension to this process (Boin and Rhinard, 2023). Existing research addresses consular cooperation mechanisms, the use of the European Emergency Fund, and the involvement of the European Agency for Civil Protection (Csatlós, 2021; Feltynowski, 2023), yet there remains significant scope for further exploration of the subject, particularly regarding the specific experience of Romania and the impact of European policies on it.

The current state of research in the field of EU policies and mechanisms regarding the repatriation of citizens reflects a growing interest in analyzing the efficiency and sustainability of these processes, especially in crisis contexts (Lang, 2020; Niemann and Zaun, 2018). The specialized literature emphasizes that, although the European Union has a well-defined legal and institutional framework, the effective implementation of repatriation mechanisms largely depends on the cooperation among Member States and their capacity to respond rapidly to emergency situations (Kaeding et al., 2022; Carrera, 2016; Bouteillet-Paquet, 2003).

Recent studies highlight the existence of essential instruments, such as the Directive on Consular Protection and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, which provide logistical and financial support in the repatriation process (Csatlós, 2019; Feltynowski, 2023). At the same time, the key role of inter-institutional coordination is emphasized, particularly between the European External Action Service, the Council of the European Union, and the European Commission, alongside the diplomatic missions of Member States and EU delegations, which can facilitate cooperation with local authorities and support repatriation efforts in third countries (Gkliati and Nicolosi, 2023; Robu, 2024).

A frequently debated issue is the capacity of the European Union to manage multiple crises and to ensure a coherent support framework for Member States in repatriation actions, considering that this process requires coordination between European structures and national authorities (Boin and Rhinard, 2023; Beaucillon, 2020). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, studies indicate that although significant logistical and administrative challenges were encountered, European mechanisms succeeded in facilitating the repatriation of over 500,000 people from around the world, most of whom were citizens of EU Member States, as well as residents and, in certain cases, vulnerable third-country nationals (Barbier-Gauchard et al., 2021; European Commission, 2020). However, research also notes the existence of gaps at both the European and national levels, such as the lack of adequate resources and the need for greater flexibility in implementing repatriation procedures (Sangiovanni, 2013).

With regard to Romania, the issue of repatriation has not yet been sufficiently explored in the specialized literature, resulting in relatively limited available analyses. This underscores the necessity for more detailed research into how European policies influence national decisions and the specific experiences of repatriation. The case of repatriating Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020 remains underexplored, providing fertile ground for research and academic contribution. Thus, the present work aims to fill this gap by starting with an analysis of the relevant international regulations and the necessary theoretical and conceptual clarifications for understanding the repatriation phenomenon. At the same time, it emphasizes both the European and national frameworks, highlighting the influence of European Union policies on national decisions. Since the specialized literature on this topic is relatively limited, this study represents not only an opportunity to contribute to the development of knowledge in the field but also an intellectual challenge typical of pioneering academic endeavors.

The subject of this work is the analysis of the policies and mechanisms of the European Union in the field of citizen repatriation, with a special focus on the case of repatriating Romanian citizens in exceptional situations from the United Kingdom in 2020. It explores both the European legislative and institutional framework that regulates the repatriation process and the specific measures adopted by Romania, highlighting the challenges and solutions identified in the context of the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-Brexit transition.

This research seeks to highlight how both European and national policies were applied in a crisis situation, as well as their impact on the affected citizens, with the aim of identifying good practices and possible improvements to the existing mechanisms.

The reasons for choosing this topic stem from the complexity and timeliness of the repatriation process within the European Union, especially in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as from the particularities of the bilateral context between Romania and the United Kingdom in 2020, marked by the post-Brexit transition. Furthermore, this research is justified by several academic, practical, and strategic considerations that underscore both its relevance and the contribution it can make to understanding and improving repatriation mechanisms.

First, the author, as a diplomat, offers an applied perspective on the issue of repatriation, having had the opportunity to directly test the tools and legislation in force in various contexts. This professional experience allows not only for a theoretical analysis of the phenomenon but also for a critical evaluation of how European and national policies are implemented in practice, identifying both the strengths and the weaknesses of the existing mechanisms. Therefore, the work adds value by integrating field observations and relevant case studies, contributing to the development of a more nuanced understanding of the repatriation process.

Second, the topic is current and relevant in the context of increasingly frequent crises that require rapid intervention by states and the European Union. While the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the vulnerabilities of citizens abroad and the need for efficient repatriation mechanisms, other recent crises—such as the war in Ukraine, evacuations from Afghanistan, or emergencies caused by natural disasters—have underscored the importance of well-coordinated strategies at both the European and national levels. These recurring elements emphasize that repatriation is not merely an isolated issue but a constant challenge that necessitates continuous improvements in response frameworks.

Third, the research addresses the need to generate new processes of reflection at both the national and European levels regarding how existing mechanisms could be reinforced to become more flexible and better prepared to meet future challenges. Analyzing how the European Union and its Member States manage repatriations can provide valuable insights for improving inter-institutional cooperation, optimizing resources, and adapting public policies to continuously changing geopolitical and social realities.

Thus, this work not only fills a gap in the specialized literature but also proposes an innovative approach by combining normative and conceptual analysis with practical observations, in order to contribute to the development of more efficient mechanisms that are better adapted to the needs of European citizens.

The structure of the work consists of an analysis of how European repatriation policies and mechanisms functioned effectively in a dual crisis context—the global health crisis and the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union—and how these influenced the management of repatriating Romanian citizens in vulnerable situations.

The central issue is related to the efficiency and flexibility of the European Union’s mechanisms to respond quickly and effectively to the needs of its citizens, especially in the case of Member States with a significant diaspora, such as Romania. At the same time, the topic raises questions about the capacity of Romanian national institutions to collaborate with their European and British counterparts to ensure the protection and repatriation of their citizens in crisis situations.

Thus, the work seeks to answer essential questions: How effective are the European Union’s policies and mechanisms in the case of complex and overlapping crises? How were these mechanisms implemented to rapidly respond to the exceptional situations of Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom? What were the main challenges encountered and what lessons can be learned to improve the future repatriation process?

The relevance of the research is significant both for the academic environment and for policymakers, given the complexity and dynamism of the European Union’s policies on citizen repatriation, especially in crisis contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic against the backdrop of Brexit. For academia, this thesis contributes to expanding the specialized literature by addressing a relatively recent and underexplored topic—the repatriation mechanism at the European Union level and the national regulatory elements supporting the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020. Moreover, the subject of the thesis offers an opportunity for an interdisciplinary analysis at the intersection of European studies, international relations, and public policy, facilitating a deeper understanding of the European Union’s mechanisms and their relationship with national policies. The case study, which is intended to complete this academic endeavor, can also serve as a reference work for future similar studies on citizen mobility, consular protection, and crisis management at the European level. Additionally, the present work seeks to consolidate the existing academic foundation by offering critical and analytical perspectives on how the European Union and Romania have managed the repatriation process(es) in a context of

multiple crises. For practitioners and public institutional stakeholders, it provides a detailed evaluation of the efficiency of repatriation mechanisms, which can support public institutions in optimizing future policies and procedures.

In this spirit, the work presents a series of practical recommendations for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other institutions involved in crisis management, with the objective of consolidating repatriation processes and consular assistance. In an organic manner, the present work can serve as a basis for a process of reviewing public policies with the aim of increasing efficiency and the capacity to quickly meet the needs of citizens in emergency situations. Furthermore, the work emphasizes the importance of strengthening cooperation between national and European institutions by identifying both the strengths and vulnerabilities in the repatriation process. Thus, the research presents significant theoretical value through the dual nature of normative elements and public policies combined with practical solutions derived from the case studies presented, making it a useful tool for both academia and practitioners and decision-makers involved in citizen repatriation management.

The innovative aspects of this research lie in addressing a contemporary and insufficiently explored subject, analyzing how the European Union's policies and mechanisms were applied in the specific context of repatriating Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020—a period simultaneously marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-Brexit transition. The work makes an original contribution by examining a concrete case in detail, highlighting both the challenges encountered and the solutions adopted by Romania and the European Union in a situation of multiple crises. Another innovative aspect is the comparative analysis between European policies and national strategies, emphasizing how they interact and influence the outcomes of the repatriation process.

The interdisciplinary character of the research is highlighted by combining several fields of study, such as international relations, European studies, public policies, and international law. This complex perspective allows for a broader understanding of the subject by integrating the analysis of European legal norms with the evaluation of political decisions and administrative mechanisms. The work also leverages concepts from crisis management and international cooperation,

contributing to the development of knowledge regarding how European and national actors collaborate to protect the rights and safety of citizens in emergency situations. Thus, the research succeeds in offering an integrated and innovative vision of a complex and current phenomenon.

To answer these questions, the research will employ a qualitative analysis method, combining the examination of official documents such as European policies and regulations, government reports, and diplomatic communiqués with the analysis of speeches and public statements by the involved actors. In addition, case studies and statistical data regarding the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom will be integrated to provide as clear and detailed an image as possible of the process analyzed. This diversified methodological approach will allow for a comprehensive evaluation of the efficiency of the policies and mechanisms used, thereby supporting the formulation of the conclusions and recommendations in the work.

The introspective type of this research is predominantly exploratory and descriptive. The exploratory nature is justified by the fact that the subject under analysis—the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020—is relatively new and insufficiently studied, especially in the dual context of the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. Through this approach, the research seeks to identify the main policies and mechanisms used, as well as the challenges and solutions related to the repatriation process.

The descriptive component of the research consists of a detailed presentation of both European and Romanian policies, the roles of the involved institutions, and the manner in which these institutions managed the repatriation of citizens in exceptional situations. The aim is to provide a clear and well-documented picture of the process analyzed, highlighting both the normative framework and its practical implementation. This type of introspection allows not only for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon studied but also for the identification of future research directions and improvements to repatriation mechanisms.

The cases to be studied in this research include the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020, with a focus on those citizens who faced exceptional situations, such as job loss, lack of financial resources, medical issues, or other vulnerable circumstances, accentuated

by the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainties generated by Brexit. The actions and measures adopted by Romanian and European authorities to facilitate repatriation will be analyzed, such as the emergency flights organized by the Romanian state and the support provided through diplomatic missions. At the same time, the research will examine how the cooperation among Romania, the European Union, and the United Kingdom influenced the efficiency of the repatriation process, taking into account the opinions expressed by repatriated citizens, where available.

2. The Conceptual Framework of Citizen Repatriation in the European Union

The repatriation process within the European Union is closely linked to fundamental principles such as free movement, consular protection, and respect for citizens' rights. It is regulated by European treaties and relevant normative acts, including the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and Decision 95/553/EC. Repatriation is considered a fundamental right derived from European citizenship (Long, 2011; Bouteillet-Paquet, 2003), and this process reflects solidarity among Member States while involving close cooperation, especially in crisis situations (De Boer and Zieck, 2020). The specialized literature highlights both the legal, administrative, and political aspects of this phenomenon (Guild and Minderhoud, 2011).

In the current geopolitical context, international crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have tested the EU's capacity to act efficiently and in solidarity (Barbier-Gauchard et al., 2021; Kaeding et al., 2022). Repatriation involves the participation of multiple actors: citizens, national authorities, international organizations, and host states. It can be voluntary, forced, or triggered by crises. The success of the process depends on European coordination and the allocated resources (Carrera, 2016; Csatlós, 2019).

From a legal perspective, the right to repatriation is regulated by international treaties and conventions—including the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)—which impose on states the obligation to facilitate the return of citizens to their own country, especially in emergency situations (Knapp, 2023; Bagheri and Bisset, 2022; Paulussen, 2021). These norms emphasize that repatriation is a responsibility derived from human rights, not merely a privilege or an administrative option.

The European Union has created instruments such as the Internal Security Fund, FAMI, the rescEU programme, and the Civil Protection Mechanism, which support Member States in managing repatriations, particularly in crisis situations (Lang, 2020; Le Coz and Newland, 2021). However, differences in administrative capacity among states and divergent political interests generate unequal application of these mechanisms (Kochenov, 2016; Macklin, 2007; Spiro, 2019).

Thus, the repatriation process becomes an instrument of the EU's migration and security policies, reflecting the commitment to protect citizens and to consolidate a common European identity (Loxa, 2025; Sangiovanni, 2013). However, the reluctance of some states to repatriate certain citizens—due to security concerns or limited resources—raises legal and ethical dilemmas (Stenger, 2023; Ingram et al., 2022). Disparities among Member States affect cohesion and the perception of European solidarity (Hassan, 2024; de Clerck et al., 2023).

Repatriation is also an instrument of European diplomacy, used to strengthen external relations and public trust in EU institutions (Ceccorulli, 2022; Feltynowski, 2023). The success of European mechanisms depends on the willingness of states to cooperate and their constant commitment to protecting citizens (Shulla and Leal-Filho, 2023; Gkliati and Nicolosi, 2023). At the same time, using repatriation as a diplomatic tool may generate tensions in relations with third countries or among Member States (Feldman et al., 2024; Ullah, 2024).

The repatriation of citizens in the European Union is more than an administrative obligation of Member States; it is an expression of the EU's commitment to protect and support its citizens, regardless of where they are located. The concept is closely linked to the principles of free movement and consular protection, thus becoming a fundamental right derived from European citizenship (Manzotti, 2023). This right guarantees not only freedom of movement but also access to consular support from other Member States when the citizen's country of origin does not have diplomatic representation in the respective country.

Repatriation contributes to consolidating European identity and strengthens citizens' trust in EU institutions by demonstrating the global extension of protection offered by EU citizenship (Zuntz and Columbu, 2024). Legally, repatriation is supported by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and European legislation, which confers upon it a special status within the spectrum of citizens' rights. However, the implementation of this right faces difficulties, including

lack of resources, coordination issues, and variations among Member States (Kusari and Walsh, 2021; Zharkynbekova et al., 2024; Tünsmeier, 2022).

Repatriation is not mentioned as an absolute right in treaties but is recognized as a logical extension of consular protection (Boková, 2022). The jurisprudence of the Court of Justice of the European Union has contributed to consolidating this right by interpreting it in the context of fundamental freedoms and family protection (Antoniazzi, 2019). The EU supports the process through institutions such as the European External Action Service and Frontex, which ensure coordination and resources for repatriation operations (Gkliati and Nicolosi, 2023).

Although the legal framework is clear, the implementation of repatriation depends on the political and administrative decisions of each Member State, leading to discrepancies and inequalities in application (Fabbrini and Zgaga, 2024; Welfens and Bonjour, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis highlighted these differences, with some states having the capacity to act quickly while others faced major difficulties. Political factors and selective criteria influence the prioritization of citizens in the repatriation process, particularly affecting vulnerable persons or those with dual citizenship (Kusari and Walsh, 2021).

To reduce these discrepancies, there is a need to harmonize repatriation mechanisms and establish minimum standards at the European level (Katelouzou and Sergakis, 2021). This would ensure equal protection for all citizens and support less-prepared states through the intervention of European institutions such as DG ECHO. Economic constraints in some states have affected repatriation capacity, especially during crises, which emphasizes the need for a permanent European fund for repatriation (Piattoni and Notermans, 2024; Masuku, 2024).

In international law, repatriation is viewed as an obligation derived from human rights, based on the right to life, security, and family reunification (Kortukova et al., 2020). However, the application of these norms is hampered by the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms, which often renders repatriation a theoretical right (Moreno-Lax et al., 2019). The crisis in Libya illustrated the difficulties in coordination and resource allocation among Member States, despite recommendations from the UN and the Council of Europe (Franceschetti et al., 2024).

To overcome these challenges, a permanent European mechanism is needed to coordinate repatriation and ensure the necessary resources, thereby reducing dependence on the individual political will of states (Kortukova et al., 2020). The creation of a monitoring and sanctioning mechanism would contribute to a more efficient and uniform application of this right (Moreno-Lax et al., 2019). Repatriation cannot be separated from the full spectrum of fundamental rights, and the lack of an effective mechanism undermines the protection provided by international law (Tünsmeier, 2022).

In the absence of efficient cooperation, current mechanisms risk being insufficient, especially in the face of global crises (Boin and Rhinard, 2023). Even if European financial support is available, the logistical management remains the responsibility of the states, which can create difficulties for those with limited resources. This reality underlines the importance of a more active involvement by European institutions in coordinating repatriations and in developing a culture of solidarity (Kaeding et al., 2022).

The repatriation of European Union citizens is influenced by a variety of factors that reflect the complexity of the global context in which we live. The specialized literature identifies numerous events that can necessitate repatriation—from armed conflicts, humanitarian crises, and pandemics to political instability, economic recessions, ecological disasters, security threats, discrimination, and legal issues. Each of these factors requires rapid and coordinated intervention by Member States and European institutions, underscoring the importance of having efficient repatriation mechanisms and solid cooperation at the EU level.

International crises, such as the conflicts in Syria or Afghanistan, the COVID-19 pandemic, or natural disasters, have shown that European citizens can become extremely vulnerable outside the Union, requiring immediate intervention for their protection (Aung et al., 2021; Scissa, 2024). Political instability, illustrated by cases such as Libya or Afghanistan, has necessitated rapid evacuations, highlighting the essential role of diplomacy and international cooperation in the repatriation process (Bagheri and Bisset, 2022).

Economic factors, such as the financial collapse in certain third countries, can force European citizens to return home, necessitating support for their social and professional reintegration (Alam

et al., 2021). Additionally, in humanitarian crises, repatriation becomes not only a right but also a moral obligation of the European Union and its Member States (Islam and Haque, 2024).

The European Civil Protection Fund has played an essential role in facilitating repatriations, particularly during the pandemic, by providing financial and logistical support to Member States (Takács and Muhoray, 2024; Wickramasekara, 2022). However, the efficiency of these operations also depends on the political willingness to cooperate and prioritize citizen protection (Linos and Chachko, 2022).

There are significant discrepancies among Member States regarding reintegration policies—some offer extensive support, while others impose restrictions, thereby affecting equal treatment and European solidarity (Rigotti and Barboza, 2021; Belcheva, 2021). Legislative changes in third countries can also become triggering factors for repatriation, especially when they affect the fundamental rights of European citizens, such as access to employment or property (Mittiga, 2022; Beri and Nubong, 2021).

Events such as coups or the establishment of authoritarian regimes can lead to mass repatriations, particularly when the safety of European citizens is at risk (Tsourapas, 2021). Evacuation, as a temporary measure, differs from repatriation in that the latter is a definitive solution for bringing citizens back to their country of origin.

Security threats, such as terrorism or organized crime, are other factors that may necessitate repatriation, emphasizing the need for rapid responses by the Union (Wagner, 2022). Moreover, ecological disasters caused by climate change are becoming an increasingly frequent cause for repatriation, requiring environmental factors to be included in the EU's response strategies (Smith et al., 2023).

Health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have demonstrated the importance of cooperation among Member States and the existence of well-established logistical mechanisms (Nicaise et al., 2022; Koinova et al., 2023). Legal issues, including cases of arrest or abusive detention in third countries, also necessitate repatriation, especially when there is a risk of inhumane treatment (Spadaro, 2021; van Waas and Brekoo, 2023).

Discrimination based on nationality, religion, or sexual orientation in third countries may require the repatriation of European citizens, representing both a legal and moral responsibility of the Union to protect them (Skuban et al., 2022; Giraldo, 2023).

The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the European Union plays an essential role in facilitating the repatriation of European citizens from third countries, providing a coherent framework for external actions and crisis interventions. Through this mechanism, Member States cooperate to protect EU citizens by using diplomatic, logistical, and financial tools to efficiently manage repatriations (Andrade, 2023). Recent crises, such as the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan or the COVID-19 pandemic, have highlighted the EU's capacity to respond in a coordinated and solidary manner to international challenges. The European External Action Service (EEAS) plays a central role in these operations by ensuring diplomatic communication and logistical support (Csatlós, 2021).

The EU Civil Protection Mechanism provides financial and logistical support to Member States and is activated in major crisis situations to organize repatriation and evacuation operations. The EU's external missions, such as those in the Sahel, Libya, or Ukraine, also contribute to protecting European citizens by providing direct on-the-ground support. Cooperation with international organizations, such as the UN, WHO, or OSCE, further strengthens the EU's capacity to act efficiently and in global partnership.

Although the CFSP facilitates a rapid and coordinated response, challenges remain due to differences among Member States in terms of available resources and the complexity of the EU's decision-making process, which requires consensus among all Member States (Wright et al., 2020). Nevertheless, recent experiences have shown a strong collective will to collaborate for the protection of European citizens, reinforcing the role of the CFSP as an essential pillar of European security and solidarity.

The EU's financial and operational instruments directly support the management of the repatriation process by providing the necessary resources for the rapid organization of these operations. The European Civil Protection Fund provides financial support to Member States in

emergency situations (Rigotti, 2021). The European External Action Service and the Civil Protection Mechanism coordinate interventions and mobilize resources through the Emergency Response Coordination Centre. During the pandemic, these instruments were decisive in organizing repatriation flights and providing primary assistance to citizens.

The consular network of European countries plays an important role in protecting citizens, especially in states where a Member State does not have diplomatic representation, by allowing citizens to access consular assistance through another Member State. Frontex contributes by providing logistical and technical support, ensuring air transport and coordinating operations in crisis cases (Csatlós, 2021).

The European legal framework supports these instruments through the provisions of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. However, differences in capacity among Member States and the complexity of the EU decision-making process can hinder rapid interventions. Despite these difficulties, the Union has demonstrated efficiency in managing repatriations in the context of recent global crises (Schunz and Damro, 2020).

Cooperation among Member States and inter-institutional coordination are essential for the success of European repatriation policies. The solidarity among states, enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, mandates mutual support in situations where one Member State lacks resources or representation in third countries. The COVID-19 pandemic was a clear example of effective cooperation, in which resources were shared, repatriation flights coordinated, and medical assistance provided jointly.

The European Commission, through DG ECHO, plays a central role in coordinating these efforts by allocating funds and resources to support Member States. The EEAS ensures diplomatic communication and logistical support through its global network. The Council of the European Union contributes by establishing strategies and adopting decisions necessary to facilitate repatriation (Lafleur, 2020). Specialized agencies, such as Frontex, provide logistical and technical support in repatriation operations, thereby enhancing the efficiency of these processes.

Although there are differences among Member States regarding their capacity to respond and the resources available, the European Union is making efforts to mitigate these disparities through financial support and cooperative mechanisms. Challenges also arise from the complex decision-making process, where consensus is sometimes difficult to achieve; however, in practice, recent crises have shown an increased capacity for effective collaboration (Bergmann and Müller, 2024).

Inter-institutional cooperation is strengthened through the sharing of information, the use of common communication platforms, and participation in specialized working groups. These mechanisms allow for rapid and effective responses to crises, contributing to the protection of European citizens regardless of where they are. The partnership between European institutions and Member States reflects the shared commitment to the EU's fundamental values.

On the international level, crisis management and global cooperation are essential for protecting citizens in emergency situations. The ability to anticipate, plan, and respond rapidly to crises is vital in an international context characterized by instability and interdependence (Vargas-Hernández, 2023; Wagner, 2022). Mechanisms such as the EU Civil Protection Mechanism or collaborations with the WHO and the UN are examples of efficiency in managing global crises.

International organizations, particularly the UN and its agencies, play an important role in humanitarian crises and armed conflicts, and the European Union contributes through its own instruments and funds, such as the European Humanitarian Aid Fund (Zotti, 2021). International cooperation involves not only immediate intervention but also the exchange of good practices and the development of common strategies for risk prevention and the strengthening of institutional resilience (Wahlbeck, 2019).

Thus, in the face of current and future crises, the European Union and international partners must work closely together to ensure efficient and rapid responses. Only through solidarity, coordination, and the optimal use of resources can the safety of citizens be truly protected, regardless of the nature of the crisis or where it occurs.

The national legal framework of Romania regarding the repatriation of Romanian citizens from abroad reflects the international commitments assumed by the Romanian state and the obligations derived from its status as an EU Member State. The Romanian Constitution guarantees citizens the right to protection regardless of where they are, and Law no. 248/2005 on the regime of free movement details the state's responsibilities in providing consular assistance and facilitating repatriation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through its diplomatic missions, is the main institution involved in this process, acting swiftly in crisis situations—such as in Gaza or Lebanon—to repatriate vulnerable Romanian citizens.

Law no. 269/2003 on the status of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps establishes the responsibilities of diplomatic personnel in providing the necessary support, while Government Decision no. 384/2001 regulates the protection of Romanians working abroad, including specific measures for repatriation in emergency situations. The funding of these interventions is provided for by Law no. 500/2002 on public finances, with the possibility of accessing European funds in exceptional situations. International cooperation complements this framework, with Romania benefiting from the support of European consular protection mechanisms and collaborating with the UN or the International Organization for Migration.

Repatriation procedures are clearly established and involve coordinated actions between diplomatic missions, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, local authorities in host states, and the competent Romanian institutions. Events such as the crisis in Afghanistan in 2021 have underscored the importance of a well-established legal framework, as well as the difficulties related to limited resources and bureaucracy. Continuous adaptation to global challenges, such as pandemics or climate change, remains a necessity alongside the strengthening of consular infrastructure and international cooperation (Lafleur and Vintila, 2020; Apetrei, 2019; Paul, 2020).

Managing repatriation in Romania involves an extensive network of national institutions that work in coordination to protect Romanian citizens. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the main coordinator of these actions, through the Consular Department and the network of diplomatic missions and consular offices, which provide legal, logistical, and diplomatic support. The Emergency Situations Department collaborates with the MFA to organize transportation and

provide medical assistance, while the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of National Defense ensure the necessary logistics for moving citizens back to Romania.

The Ministry of Health plays a vital role in providing medical assistance, especially in health crises, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry of National Defense contributes by using military resources in evacuations from conflict zones, while the Ministry of Public Finance ensures the allocation of the necessary funds. The Border Police manage the legal formalities upon return and cooperate in implementing safety measures. The support offered by the European Union—through the EEAS, Frontex, or the Civil Protection Mechanism—is essential in complementing national actions (Csatlós, 2021).

Romania has been tested in several international crises, the most notable being the COVID-19 pandemic and evacuations from areas such as Afghanistan or the Middle East. These contexts have highlighted the lack of sufficient financial resources, gaps in inter-institutional coordination, and diplomatic challenges. At the same time, the experiences gained have led to the development of good practices that improve the state's response capacity.

Among the most relevant good practices are the strengthening of inter-institutional cooperation, the use of digital platforms for communication with citizens, procedural flexibility in the face of crises, and the rapid access to European funds. The involvement of civil society and collaboration with international organizations have further enhanced the efficiency of state institutions. Romania has demonstrated an increased capacity for adaptation—from managing transportation and medical assistance to maintaining constant communication with citizens in vulnerable situations (Mihaela, 2023; Nica and Moraru, 2020).

Therefore, Romania has developed a solid and functional framework for citizen repatriation, supported by a well-coordinated institutional network and clear financial and legal instruments. Although challenges persist, the implemented good practices, European support, and international partnerships contribute to strengthening the state's response capacity and the effective protection of citizens in crisis situations.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research is to formulate recommendations for improving repatriation policies and mechanisms, based on the lessons learned from case studies and identified good practices.

The overall objective of the research is to analyze the policies and mechanisms of the European Union and Romania regarding the repatriation of citizens in exceptional situations, using as a case study the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 2020, and to evaluate the efficiency, challenges, and impact of this process on citizens and public policies.

The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

- O1. To analyze the conceptual and legislative framework of citizen repatriation within the European Union and identify the main policies and regulations that govern this process.
- O2. To examine the institutional mechanisms and instruments used by the European Union and Romania for the repatriation of citizens in crisis situations.
- O3. To investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit on the mobility and safety of Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom.
- O4. To analyze the case study concerning the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020, with a focus on the categories of affected citizens and the repatriation strategies adopted.
- O5. To evaluate the efficiency and challenges encountered in the repatriation process, including through a SWOT analysis of the actions carried out by Romanian and European authorities.

3.2. Research Design

The research design is exploratory-descriptive, aiming to investigate and analyze in detail the policies and mechanisms of the European Union and Romania in the field of citizen repatriation, with a particular emphasis on the case of Romanian citizens repatriated from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 2020. The research combines qualitative and quantitative methods to offer a comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon analyzed. Data are collected

and interpreted from primary and secondary sources, such as official documents, reports, legislation, press releases, statistical data, and relevant previous studies, in order to provide a clear picture of the institutional, legislative, and operational framework of the repatriation process.

The qualitative approach includes the analysis of the content of public policy documents and the evaluation of institutional speeches, aiming to understand the role and involvement of the main actors in the repatriation process. Additionally, it analyzes the cooperation between Romania, the European Union, and the United Kingdom, as well as the challenges encountered in implementing repatriation measures. The quantitative approach focuses on interpreting statistical data regarding the number of Romanian citizens repatriated, the duration of the process, and the evolution dynamics, with the objective of identifying trends and determining factors.

The research design is structured to allow for a broad analysis of the phenomenon, beginning with the theoretical and conceptual framework, continuing with a detailed investigation of the repatriation policies and mechanisms, and culminating with the case study of the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom. This structure ensures the coherence and relevance of the obtained results, facilitating an in-depth understanding of the subject and providing a solid basis for formulating pertinent conclusions and recommendations.

3.3. Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study aim to understand and evaluate the policies and mechanisms of the European Union and Romania in the repatriation process of citizens in exceptional situations, with a focus on the case of Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom in 2020.

The main questions the research seeks to answer are:

Q1. How effective were the policies and mechanisms of the European Union in facilitating the repatriation of citizens in the context of the pandemic crisis and Brexit?

Q2. How did Romania cooperate with European and British institutions to ensure the repatriation of its citizens in exceptional situations?

Q3. What were the main challenges and limitations of this process, and what lessons can be learned for future similar crises?

3.4. Data Collection Methods and Techniques

The research is primarily based on secondary data collection methods, through the analysis of documents and official sources, but it also incorporates elements of quantitative analysis by utilizing statistical data and reports published by the involved institutions.

An essential method is documentary analysis, which involves the examination and interpretation of legal documents, policies, and strategies adopted at both the European and national levels, as well as official reports issued by European Union institutions, such as the European Commission and the European External Action Service, and by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This method allows for the identification of the legal framework and the institutional mechanisms underlying the repatriation process, highlighting both the challenges and the solutions adopted.

Quantitative data collection is carried out by using official statistical sources, such as data provided by Eurostat, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other governmental agencies. These data include the number of Romanian citizens repatriated, the time period and locations involved, as well as the resources used to facilitate repatriation. The analysis of these data helps to highlight trends and the dynamics of the repatriation process, offering a clear perspective on its magnitude and efficiency.

Additionally, the research is based on a comparative analysis of the policies and mechanisms used by Romania and other European Union Member States in the repatriation process, with the aim of identifying good practices and lessons learned. This method facilitates a broader understanding of the subject and contributes to formulating pertinent recommendations for improving future repatriation processes.

3.5. Research Instrument

The research instrument used in this study is documentary analysis, an essential tool for studying the repatriation policies and mechanisms of the European Union and Romania. Documentary

analysis involves the collection, examination, and interpretation of a varied set of official, legal, administrative, and statistical documents relevant to the research topic.

The research instrument is based on a rigorous selection of sources, including European treaties and regulations that define the legal framework for citizen repatriation, such as the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and the Directive on the Consular Protection of European Citizens. Additionally, reports and documents issued by European institutions such as the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the Civil Protection Agency are included, which detail the mechanisms and funds available for repatriation.

At the national level, the research instrument includes the analysis of relevant Romanian legislation, such as the Law on Consular Assistance and the regulations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding crisis management and the repatriation of Romanian citizens. The analyzed documents include official press releases, strategies, and action plans issued by Romanian authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-Brexit transition, highlighting the measures adopted to support citizens in difficulty.

An important aspect of the research instrument is the analysis of official statistics, which provides quantitative data on the number of Romanian citizens repatriated, the duration and frequency of repatriation actions, and the resources used. These data are collected from sources such as Eurostat, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other relevant institutions, contributing to an accurate evaluation of the phenomenon's magnitude.

The research instrument also includes the analysis of the content of speeches and official statements made by government representatives, both Romanian and European, which allows for the identification of the perceptions, intentions, and strategies adopted by decision-makers. By using this instrument, the research ensures a systematic and detailed approach to the repatriation process, highlighting both the legal and institutional framework as well as the dynamics and challenges of the analyzed process.

3.6. Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis methods used in this research are diverse and complementary, aiming to interpret and understand in a comprehensive manner the policies and mechanisms of repatriation of the European Union and Romania, with a particular emphasis on the case study of the repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020. The research combines qualitative and quantitative methods, allowing for a broad and detailed approach to the analyzed subject.

The qualitative data analysis is based on content analysis, which involves the examination of official documents, legislation, institutional reports, press releases, and political speeches. This method facilitates the identification of the main themes, ideas, and trends related to the repatriation process, as well as the critical or problematic aspects highlighted by the involved actors. Content analysis allows for the identification of relationships between various factors, such as the legal framework, the institutions involved, and the measures adopted, thereby contributing to a deep understanding of how repatriation policies and mechanisms have been implemented.

Another qualitative method used is comparative analysis, which involves comparing the repatriation policies and practices applied by Romania with those of other European Union Member States. This method allows for the identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the Romanian approach, highlighting good practices and possible improvements to repatriation mechanisms.

The quantitative data analysis is carried out through the interpretation of official statistics regarding the number of Romanian citizens repatriated, the duration and frequency of repatriation actions, and the resources used. The collected data are analyzed to identify trends and the dynamics of the repatriation process, contributing to a precise evaluation of its efficiency and impact. The statistical methods used include descriptive analysis, which provides a clear picture of the general characteristics of the phenomenon, and trend analysis, which allows for observing the evolution of the repatriation process over time.

Within this research, an important method of analysis is also the SWOT analysis, which is used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the repatriation process. This method helps to identify the factors that influenced the success or difficulties

encountered in the repatriation process, providing a solid basis for formulating recommendations and conclusions.

4. Case Study: The Repatriation of Romanian Citizens in Exceptional Situations, in 2020, from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

At the end of 2020, British authorities imposed Level 4 restrictions in London and southeast England in response to the emergence of a new variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, considered significantly more contagious (Davies et al., 2021). This decision triggered a wave of reactions across Europe, including the suspension of flights from the United Kingdom—a measure also adopted by Romania starting on December 21, 2020. The suspension of air traffic and the closure of transit routes severely affected the mobility of Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom, especially seasonal workers, students, and tourists.

The restrictive measures imposed by several European states, including France, led to major blockages in the English Channel area and rendered it impossible for thousands of Romanians to return to their country. According to data provided by the Romanian Embassy in London, during the period December 20–31, 2020, over 3,500 phone calls and 2,800 requests for assistance via email were recorded. The most affected category was seasonal workers, representing 65% of those stranded, followed by students and tourists (20%) and other persons in vulnerable situations (15%). In the face of this crisis, Romanian authorities mobilized an emergency plan that involved diplomatic negotiations and inter-institutional cooperation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), in cooperation with the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, secured the opening of transit corridors through Hungary and Bulgaria, thereby facilitating repatriation by land. In addition, in partnership with airline operators and with the support of the European Union, several charter flights were organized, which enabled the return of over 700 Romanian citizens to Romania by the end of December 2020 (Rareș-Mihai et al., 2024).

Table 4.1. Romanian Authorities' Intervention and Diplomatic Initiatives for Repatriation

Measures Adopted	Description	Results
Emergency Repatriation Plan	The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Transport, and Ministry of Internal Affairs established measures to manage the situation of stranded citizens.	Creation of an organized framework for repatriation.
Diplomatic Negotiations	The Romanian Embassy in London and consulates general collaborated with British and European authorities.	Identification of alternative transportation solutions.
Securing Transit Corridors	Safe routes were established through Hungary and Bulgaria for road transport.	Repatriation of citizens without air transport options.
Special Flights via Budapest and Sofia	Organization of air transport in collaboration with transit states.	230 Romanians repatriated via Budapest, 24 via Sofia.
Organized Charter Flights	The Romanian government and airline operators facilitated the return of citizens.	700 Romanians repatriated between December 22–31, 2020.

In addition to government efforts, Romanian community organizations and volunteers played an important role in managing the crisis by mobilizing to support stranded citizens. Various civic groups and Romanian churches provided temporary accommodation, food, and clothing to those who had nowhere to stay or lacked financial resources.

Especially in areas affected by road blockages, such as Dover and Folkestone, Romanian communities distributed hundreds of food packages and provided informational assistance regarding repatriation solutions. At the initiative of some volunteers, online communication groups were created to facilitate the exchange of information between citizens and consular authorities.

This mobilization demonstrated the solidarity of the Romanian community and underscored the importance of informal support networks in crisis management.

The crisis generated by the emergence of the new SARS-CoV-2 variant highlighted the vulnerabilities of the European system for managing mobility in emergency situations. The European Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) was activated to support the repatriation of stranded European citizens, including Romanians (Eriksen et al., 2021). The European Union contributed financially to covering the transportation costs for repatriating vulnerable citizens, and diplomatic cooperation among Member States was essential for establishing transit corridors.

The pandemic experience demonstrated the need for better coordination among EU Member States for managing similar crises. In this regard, Romania and other European states proposed improving rapid intervention mechanisms and creating a more flexible legal framework to facilitate mobility in exceptional situations.

Repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in December 2020 was a major test of Romania's institutional capacity to manage an international mobility crisis. Romanian authorities demonstrated adaptability and efficiency, successfully repatriating over 700 Romanian citizens by charter flights and several hundred by land (Paul, 2020). However, the crisis also exposed significant vulnerabilities, particularly regarding communication with citizens, the lack of a permanent repatriation mechanism, and bureaucratic difficulties encountered by those stranded. In the long term, Romania must improve its emergency management procedures and work more closely with European partners to prevent similar crises in the future.

The year 2020 was marked by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which generated an unprecedented global health crisis and profoundly affected citizens' international mobility. The first interventions by Romanian authorities took place in China, where during January–February actions were carried out to inform, assist, and repatriate Romanian citizens. As the pandemic rapidly spread throughout Europe, challenges intensified, particularly in Italy—

one of the most affected countries, which is home to a large Romanian community. In this context, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) managed thousands of repatriation requests, the major difficulty being the precise identification of citizens in need, including tourists, students, seasonal workers, and persons in transit.

Repatriation was carried out mainly through commercial routes; however, where these were not available, charter flights were organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MAI) and the Ministry of Transport, with costs borne by the citizens. A significant crisis was generated in December 2020 when the United Kingdom introduced severe restrictions following the identification of a new strain of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Most European countries, including Romania, suspended flights from the United Kingdom, causing major blockages among Romanians intending to return home for the holidays. Crowding was recorded at the Dover and Folkestone border crossings, where hundreds of Romanians were stranded in vehicles or without accommodation. Romanian diplomatic missions in London and Paris intervened with mobile consular teams, distributing food and water and providing logistical support.

To resolve the situation, negotiations were initiated with British and French authorities, and charter flights and transit corridors were permitted starting on December 23. The MFA also managed special cases, such as the repatriation of Romanian citizens detained in the United Kingdom. The crisis management was supported by a detailed organizational structure, with consular teams, clear procedures, and centralized resources for managing emergencies, including in medical, humanitarian, and transportation areas.

According to official data, between March and December 2020, the Romanian Embassy and consulates in the United Kingdom handled 509 cases of consular assistance involving a total of 765 persons. Of these, 495 cases were successfully resolved, and 747 Romanian citizens were repatriated. The suspension of commercial flights and blockages imposed by European states forced Romanian authorities to organize charter flights and special road transports, ensuring the repatriation of 480 persons by these means (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2. Pandemic Context and Impact on International Mobility

Aspect	Description	Relevant Data
Restrictions Imposed	Measures adopted by British and European authorities to limit the spread of COVID-19	Mandatory quarantine, suspension of flights, restriction of cross-border travel
Affected Categories	Romanian citizens stranded in the United Kingdom due to mobility restrictions	Seasonal workers, students, tourists
Consular Assistance Requests	Number of cases handled by the Romanian Embassy and consulates in the United Kingdom	509 cases of consular assistance involving 765 persons
Resolved Cases	Romanian citizens who received consular support and were repatriated	495 cases resolved, 747 citizens repatriated
Repatriation Methods	Organization of charter flights and special road transports for affected citizens	480 persons repatriated by air and road transport

Limited mobility affected various categories of Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom differently. The most vulnerable were seasonal workers and employees in sectors hit by the pandemic, such as construction, hospitality, and cleaning services. Out of the total 480 persons repatriated by organized transport, 270 persons (approximately 69%) were seasonal workers or employees who lost their jobs. Another 95 persons (about 24%) were tourists stranded in the United Kingdom due to the suspension of flights and the closure of borders. A total of 14 persons (approximately 4%) were students not included in Erasmus programs who were affected by university closures, and 10 persons (approximately 3%) were social or medical cases requiring special assistance for repatriation (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3. Main Categories of Romanian Citizens Affected by Pandemic Restrictions in the United Kingdom (2020)

Category of Citizens	Number of Persons	Percentage (%)	Reason for Impact
Affected Seasonal Workers and Employees	270	69%	Job loss in affected sectors (construction, hospitality, cleaning)
Stranded Tourists	95	24%	Suspension of flights and border closures
Students	14	4%	University closures, exclusion from Erasmus programs
Social and Medical Cases	10	3%	Medical and social issues, requiring special assistance for repatriation
Total Repatriated Persons	480	100%	Organized air and road transport

The high number of requests put pressure on the Romanian diplomatic missions, which had to manage a high volume of inquiries. Between March and December 2020, the Romanian Embassy and consulates in the United Kingdom received 3,450 emergency phone calls and 2,850 email requests, reflecting the magnitude of the crisis and the complexity of the issues encountered by Romanian citizens (Table 4.4) (Brolan, 2002).

Table 4.4. Pressure on Romanian Diplomatic Missions

Type of Request	Number of Requests	Period Analyzed
Emergency Phone Calls	3,450	March – December 2020
Email Requests	2,850	March – December 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on international mobility, directly affecting Romanian citizens residing in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Starting in 2020, the restrictions imposed by British authorities, combined with the measures adopted by the European Union to limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, generated significant challenges

regarding the movement of people. These measures had a particularly strong impact on Romanian citizens who intended to return to Romania or continue their activities in the United Kingdom (Ayenigbara et al., 2020).

At the beginning of the pandemic, the British government implemented a series of restrictions intended to control the spread of the virus. These included the suspension of international flights, restrictions on internal movement, and the imposition of mandatory quarantine for those arriving from other countries. These measures directly affected the mobility of Romanian citizens, especially those who were temporarily in the United Kingdom, such as seasonal workers, students, and tourists. The suspension of commercial flights led to a significant increase in repatriation requests addressed to the Romanian Embassy in London and the consulates general in Manchester and Edinburgh (Mantu, 2020).

According to official data provided by the Romanian consular authorities, between March and December 2020, 509 cases of consular assistance were recorded, involving a total of 765 persons. Of these, 495 cases were successfully resolved, facilitating the repatriation of 747 Romanian citizens. Repatriation methods varied, including the organization of air or road transport for 480 persons, of which 230 were repatriated via the London–Budapest route, and 24 via the London–Sofia route. In addition, 194 cases benefited from humanitarian assistance covering basic needs such as accommodation and food, for a total of 306 persons. Besides direct consular assistance, Romanian authorities managed 3,450 emergency phone calls and responded to 2,850 email requests, reflecting the scale of the crisis and the complexity of the problems faced by Romanian citizens.

Analysis of the typology of affected citizens reveals that the majority of those repatriated were seasonal workers or persons whose employment contracts were terminated due to pandemic restrictions. Out of the 480 persons repatriated through organized transport, 270 (approximately 69%) were seasonal workers or persons who lost their jobs. Another 95 persons (around 24%) were tourists stranded in the United Kingdom due to the suspension of flights and border closures. A total of 14 persons (approximately 4%) were students not enrolled in Erasmus programs affected by university closures, and 10 persons (approximately 3%) were social or medical cases requiring special assistance for repatriation (Foley and Piper, 2021).

In the context of the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Romanian authorities played an essential role in managing the repatriation process of citizens in exceptional situations in the

United Kingdom. The Romanian Embassy in London, together with the consulates general in Manchester and Edinburgh, acted as the main communication channels between citizens and central authorities, facilitating access to information and providing direct consular assistance. The diplomatic missions coordinated the centralization of repatriation requests and ensured the necessary support for resolving administrative issues, such as obtaining travel documents and managing humanitarian cases (Dolea, 2022).

The logistical and financial support provided by the Romanian state, in cooperation with charitable organizations and Romanian religious communities, represented another important aspect of managing the repatriation process. These actions included assistance with temporary accommodation, provision of food and clothing, and support in covering transportation costs for citizens lacking sufficient financial resources. In parallel, authorities implemented sanitary protection measures and ensured compliance with quarantine and testing regulations upon arrival in Romania, in accordance with international norms (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5. Repatriation Methods and Consular Assistance

Type of Assistance	Number of Cases	Total Number of Persons
Consular Assistance Cases	509	765
Successfully Resolved Cases	495	747
Repatriation by Air/Road Transport	301	480
Repatriation via London–Budapest	-	230
Repatriation via London–Sofia	-	24
Humanitarian Assistance (accommodation, food)	194	306

To manage the repatriation crisis, Romanian authorities implemented a rapid intervention plan, which included diplomatic negotiations to organize transit corridors through the European Union. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in collaboration with the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, worked to facilitate air and road transport, ensuring the transit of citizens through Hungary and Bulgaria.

Through the Romanian Embassy in London and the consulates general in Manchester and Edinburgh, measures were taken to coordinate repatriation and convey official information to

citizens. Following negotiations, Romania secured access to transit corridors, thus facilitating the return by road. By the end of 2020, 230 Romanian citizens had been repatriated via Budapest, and 24 via Sofia, using special flights organized with the support of transit states.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the official withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union created an extremely difficult context for Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom. The health crisis profoundly affected international mobility, and restrictions on movement, the suspension of commercial flights, and the closure of borders stranded thousands of Romanians in the United Kingdom, particularly seasonal workers, students, and tourists. At the same time, Brexit exacerbated the legal and social insecurity of Romanian citizens, jeopardizing their access to public services, the labor market, and social benefits. Romanian authorities, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Romanian Embassy in London, and the consulates general in the United Kingdom, coordinated a series of actions to support the repatriation of Romanian citizens. Charter flights were organized, and transit corridors through Hungary and Bulgaria were established, leading to the repatriation of over 1,000 Romanians. The flights were operated with the support of the European Union and partner airlines, and Romanian communities in the United Kingdom provided logistical and humanitarian support to those in difficulty, through accommodation, food, and useful information.

A significant number of Romanians faced job losses, inability to pay rent, and lack of access to medical assistance. The most affected were workers in construction, agriculture, hospitality, and cleaning services, as well as students who depended on part-time jobs to support their studies. Special situations were also encountered among seafarers stranded in British ports, tourists who could not return to Romania, and persons in difficult social or medical conditions. Romanian diplomatic missions implemented emergency procedures, activated permanent communication channels, and collaborated with British and European authorities to resolve critical cases. Humanitarian support was supplemented by the involvement of volunteers and charitable organizations from the Romanian diaspora.

Brexit further complicated the situation. Although the EU Settlement Scheme was created, many Romanians encountered bureaucratic difficulties during the application process, especially those with limited access to technology or low English proficiency. Access to healthcare, education, and

social benefits was unequal and uncertain, and cases of discrimination and exploitation in the workplace became more frequent.

The crisis demonstrated both the mobilization capacity of Romanian authorities and the limitations of the existing system. It highlighted the need for permanent rapid intervention mechanisms, the consolidation of consular networks, and improved international cooperation for the protection of Romanian citizens in the diaspora. Lessons learned from this episode can contribute to the development of more effective policies for managing emergency situations, ensuring adequate support for Romanians abroad.

In the global pandemic context generated by COVID-19, Romania conducted a large-scale repatriation operation for Romanian citizens abroad, who faced severe travel restrictions, the suspension of flights, and a lack of material resources. Romanian authorities, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, closely collaborated with EU Member States and the European Civil Protection Mechanism to facilitate the return of Romanian citizens to the country. Repatriation was achieved both through flights organized by Romania and through cooperation with other European states, as part of international operations that included Romanian citizens on passenger lists. Romanian citizens were repatriated from a variety of states, from countries in Latin America and Africa to those in Asia and Oceania. The support provided by countries such as Germany, France, Austria, or Spain was essential in this process, and consular interventions also targeted evacuations from critical areas or from cruise ships. In some situations, citizens refused repatriation for financial or logistical reasons, which complicated the coordination process. Nonetheless, European solidarity and collaboration among the embassies of the Member States contributed significantly to the success of these actions.

A special case was the United Kingdom, where the pandemic overlapped with the effects of Brexit. Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom faced major difficulties, including job loss, inability to pay rent, and limited access to medical services. In this context, Romanian embassies and consulates intervened rapidly, organizing charter flights, facilitating transit through Bulgaria and Hungary, and providing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable persons. Specialized operational groups were established to manage emergencies, repatriations, and communication with citizens

in difficulty. The support of Romanian communities and charitable organizations in the United Kingdom supplemented the authorities' efforts. In addition to these actions, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs intensified diplomatic efforts, participated in international meetings, consolidated strategic relations, and modernized the consular network. Emphasis was placed on digitizing consular services and improving communication with the diaspora, including through the resumption of the Dialogue with the Diaspora program. Consular activity included a record number of services, humanitarian interventions, and repatriations from high-risk areas. Furthermore, Romania actively participated in European crisis management mechanisms, provided humanitarian aid, and contributed to the development of international cooperation policies.

Domestically, legislative reforms were initiated to facilitate rapid consular interventions, a normative framework for providing emergency financial support was created, and the Consular Department developed a guide of good practices for crisis management. Lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the importance of international coordination, logistical preparedness, and prompt response in exceptional situations. All these measures reflected the firm commitment of the Romanian state to protecting its diaspora citizens and strengthening its response capacity for potential future crises.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected international mobility, and Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom faced major obstacles in their attempt to return home. Sanitary restrictions imposed by British authorities—such as mandatory quarantine, limited access to essential services, and the suspension of commercial flights—significantly hindered the repatriation process. It became a complex logistical operation, managed with the support of both Romanian and European authorities.

Data provided by the Consular Section of the Romanian Embassy in London show that between March and December 2020, 509 cases of consular assistance were handled, involving 765 persons. Of these, 495 cases were successfully resolved, reflecting an efficiency rate of over 97%. One of the main factors influencing the dynamics of repatriation was the severe economic impact of the pandemic on the Romanian community in the United Kingdom. Many Romanians worked in sectors such as hospitality, construction, or cleaning, industries severely affected by the

lockdown, which led to job losses and a lack of financial resources. In parallel, the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union fueled uncertainty, particularly regarding residency rights, access to jobs, and social services. Although over 1.3 million Romanians applied for the EU Settlement Scheme, many chose to return to Romania, fearing the new post-Brexit regulations and the associated bureaucracy.

The repatriation process was supported by cooperation between Romanian and European authorities, with transit corridors activated through Hungary and Bulgaria. At the same time, support provided by Romanian charitable organizations and religious communities in the United Kingdom played an important role. These organizations offered temporary accommodation, food, transport, and assistance for Romanians left without support.

Thus, the dynamics of repatriation were marked by an interdependence between sanitary, economic, legal, and diplomatic factors. The success of the repatriation actions was possible due to the effective response of Romanian authorities, international collaboration, and the solidarity between institutions and citizens. The lessons learned during this period underline the need for rapid and flexible intervention mechanisms for future crisis situations.

5. SWOT Analysis

To evaluate the effectiveness of repatriation as a measure to protect citizens, it is useful to apply a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), which highlights both the strengths and the challenges of this process.

Strengths of the Repatriation Process

One of the most significant strengths of repatriation was the ability of Romanian authorities to intervene rapidly to facilitate the safe return of citizens stranded in the United Kingdom. According to official data, between March and December 2020, 509 cases of consular assistance were managed, involving 765 persons (Manta, 2020). Regarding transportation, 301 cases were resolved by organizing air and land transport for 480 persons. Of these, 230 citizens (47.9%) were

repatriated via Budapest and 24 persons (5%) via Sofia. Another advantage of repatriation was the effective collaboration with transit states, particularly Hungary and Bulgaria, which enabled the establishment of safe transport corridors. This cooperation facilitated the land repatriation of Romanian citizens, providing them with an alternative when commercial flights were suspended. In addition, Romanian authorities managed to provide humanitarian assistance to affected citizens by handling 194 cases that involved support for 306 persons. This intervention was crucial for citizens left without shelter or financial resources.

Weaknesses of the Repatriation Process

Although the repatriation process demonstrated significant institutional capacity, it also encountered major difficulties. One of the main problems was the lack of effective communication between authorities and citizens. In many cases, Romanians in the United Kingdom were not informed in a timely manner about repatriation possibilities, which generated confusion and uncertainty.

Another issue was the difficult management of air and land transport, especially under the strict restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, British authorities imposed mandatory quarantine for European citizens leaving the United Kingdom, which led to increased repatriation costs and logistical difficulties (Meer and Villegas, 2020). Another problematic aspect was the financial impact on repatriated citizens, who were forced to bear significant costs for airplane tickets and COVID-19 tests mandated by international regulations. In addition, many of the repatriated persons did not have sufficient financial resources to reintegrate quickly in Romania.

Opportunities Offered by the Repatriation Experience

The crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to improve repatriation mechanisms and international cooperation in managing emergency situations. One of the opportunities identified in this process was the strengthening of diplomatic relations between Romania and European states, which allowed for more efficient management of transport corridors and facilitated repatriation (Caligiuri et al., 2022).

Moreover, the pandemic demonstrated the importance of a digitized repatriation management system that would enable citizens to register online to request consular support. This mechanism could improve the speed and efficiency of the authorities' response in future crisis situations. In addition, the European Union provided financial support through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, which covered part of the costs for special transports and contributed to the protection of European citizens affected by the pandemic. This experience could serve as a basis for developing common strategies at the European level regarding mobility and repatriation in emergency situations.

Future Threats and Challenges

Despite the relative success of the repatriation operations, there are a number of threats that could complicate the management of future international mobility crises. One of the greatest challenges was the unpredictable evolution of the pandemic, which generated rapid changes in international transport regulations.

Another problematic factor was Brexit, which affected the rights of Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom. After January 1, 2021, many Romanians encountered difficulties in maintaining their legal status and accessing social services. By 2021, 1,350,640 Romanians had applied for the EU Settlement Scheme, but many of these faced excessive bureaucracy or rejection of their applications (Fitzek, 2021).

Furthermore, the pandemic placed economic pressures on Romania, leading to difficulties in managing the resources needed for citizen repatriation and for supporting their reintegration. The high costs of repatriation were felt both by the authorities and by the citizens, who had to pay out of pocket for transport and temporary accommodation during the quarantine period.

The SWOT analysis of the repatriation process of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020 highlights both its strengths and the difficulties encountered. On the one hand, the rapid mobilization of authorities and international cooperation allowed for the safe repatriation of a significant number of citizens. On the other hand, logistical, financial, and communication issues have shown the need to improve crisis management mechanisms. The COVID-19 pandemic

experience underscores the importance of developing efficient digital mechanisms for managing repatriation, strengthening diplomatic cooperation, and implementing financial support strategies for citizens affected by such crises. This lesson can serve as a starting point for more effective policies to protect Romanian citizens in the diaspora and to increase the resilience of the Romanian state in the face of future international crises.

Table 5.1. SWOT Analysis of the Repatriation of Romanian Citizens in 2020

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Government support for repatriation (special flights, aid)	- Limited capacity of the repatriation management system
- Support networks of Romanian communities in the diaspora	- Lack of a clear strategy for integrating repatriates
- National solidarity and private initiatives supporting repatriates	- Insufficient financial and logistical resources for all repatriates
- Flexibility in adapting crisis measures	- Stigmatization and difficulties in social and professional reintegration
Opportunities	Threats
- EU and international organizations' support for repatriation	- Travel restrictions imposed by other states; transportation difficulties
- Possibility to rethink the integration policy for returning Romanian citizens	- Rising unemployment and economic instability in Romania
- Redirecting the workforce towards strategic domestic sectors	- Risk of COVID-19 transmission upon return
- Creation of support programs for repatriates	- Lack of trust in state institutions and the measures taken

6. Impact and Implications of the Repatriation Process

The repatriation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom in 2020 took place in a context of health crisis and economic instability generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of

Romanians were affected by the suspension of commercial flights, border closures, and job losses. The process of returning home was organized by Romanian authorities, in cooperation with diplomatic missions, to support seasonal workers, students, unemployed persons, or those in extreme vulnerability. After returning to Romania, the impact of repatriation was felt on multiple levels. On an economic level, most of those who returned were unemployed or had their contracts terminated, without access to financial support—especially among those working in the informal sector. Many became dependent on social aid or family support, and the Romanian social assistance system was put under pressure. Reintegration into the labor market was difficult due to the lack of sustainable solutions.

On a social level, returning home was often perceived as a regression, especially for those who had lived in the United Kingdom for many years. Many were stigmatized by local communities due to the perceived risk of virus transmission. The institutionalized quarantine imposed upon returning amplified the feeling of marginalization. Additionally, the separation from family members remaining abroad generated tensions and imbalances in personal relationships. The psychological impact of repatriation was significant. Repatriates experienced the loss of social and financial stability, and some faced anxiety, stress, and depression. The lack of psychological support programs from the authorities exacerbated the difficulties of adapting. The situation was even more challenging for vulnerable groups, such as the homeless or those with health issues, who required additional support from charitable organizations.

Overall, the 2020 repatriation exposed structural issues related to the protection and support of Romanian citizens in the diaspora. The impact was felt at all levels—economic, social, and emotional—and the lack of robust reintegration mechanisms amplified the difficulties faced by those who returned. The crisis highlighted the need for a more coherent post-repatriation support system and public policies adapted for future emergency situations.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by the uncertainties brought about by Brexit, led to a large-scale repatriation operation of Romanian citizens from the United Kingdom. This experience revealed numerous structural vulnerabilities regarding access to social

protection, the legal status of Romanian workers, and the ability of the Romanian state to effectively manage crisis situations affecting the diaspora. Repatriation was complicated by movement restrictions imposed by British authorities and the suspension of commercial flights, which necessitated rapid and well-coordinated interventions by Romanian institutions in cooperation with international partners.

Many of the repatriated Romanians worked in vulnerable sectors, often without formal employment contracts, limiting their access to social benefits in the United Kingdom. In addition to economic challenges, citizens were also affected by legal changes introduced in the context of Brexit, which generated uncertainty regarding residency rights, access to employment, and public services. The repatriation process was supported by the Romanian Embassy in London, consulates, and community organizations, which provided logistical and humanitarian support. After returning to Romania, reintegration difficulties were significant. Citizens faced a lack of job opportunities, social stigmatization, and the absence of personalized support programs. The psychological impact of this process was profound, especially among those forced to abandon a life built abroad. In the long term, this experience underscored the urgent need to strengthen support policies for repatriates and to create efficient institutional mechanisms for managing international mobility during crises.

The recommendations emphasize the importance of digitizing consular services, improving communication with the diaspora, and developing transnational partnerships to ensure the protection of Romanian citizens. Additionally, it is proposed to support reintegration through professional retraining programs, facilities for entrepreneurship, and tailored social protection measures. The research highlights the significant role of diplomacy and European solidarity in managing repatriations and proposes reforms aimed at increasing the resilience of the Romanian state in the face of future crises.

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