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# Defining the Expat: the case of high-skilled migrants in Brussels

*Définir les expats : le cas des immigrés hautement qualifiés à Bruxelles*  
*Een definitie van de expat: hoogopgeleide migranten in Brussel*

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## Defining the Expat: the case of high-skilled migrants in Brussels

More and more attention is put by sociologists on the relation between cities, development and the activities and profiles of the people attracted by cities themselves. Brussels is a particularly vivid example of this relation, being so influenced by the massive percentage of European high-level migrants, called Expats, who live there on a temporary or a permanent basis. The article, besides trying to define what an Expat is, provides an exploratory outline of how they are perceived and they perceive themselves. Moreover, the article analyses their sense of community, showing that speaking of a coherent Expats' community, as it is commonly done by Brussels' institutions, might be quite imprecise.

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## Introduction

Authors like Harvey (1990), Sassen (1996), Sennett (1998), Gasparini (1998) underline, from different points of view, how economy and policy making are not indifferent to geography. On the contrary, there is a geography of power, and cities are its nodes. Harvey, for instance, maintains that cities are in open competition to attract investments and people – not all kinds of people, of course, but tourists, investors and high-skilled professionals. More recently, Florida (2002) establishes a relation among economic development, creative workers and places, affirming that the most creative workers tend to concentrate in specific cities, triggering a virtuous circle of development which improves the quality of life and the general economic level of those cities.

It is undeniable that Brussels, with its concentration of institution headquarters and all the related companies and services, is a symbolic and material centre of power. Such a centre of power attracts people, from all over the world but mainly from the European countries, who come to work in those institutional entities (local, regional and national representations, chambers of commerce, NGOs, but also universities and research centres) or private organisations specialised in lobbying and European project funding, as well as in consultancy and communication, translation and recruitment (Huysseune and Jans, 2008).

Because of their high mobility, it is not easy to quantify the number of these high-skilled migrants; the Brussels Europe Liaison Office advances a rough estimate of 100,000 people (around 10% of Brussels total population), a massive amount of people who have a heavy impact on the fabric of the city.

In Brussels it is common to refer to these high-skilled migrants as the *Expat community*. Nevertheless, the actual nature of this community feeling is not clear; even its existence remains doubtful, and the fact that expatriates recognise themselves in such a community often seems to be taken for granted. In such a large number of people, coming from almost all countries in the world (even though mainly from the EU and, more generally, from the Western countries plus Japan), it is conceivable to find diverse reactions to Brussels environment. Moreover, the ways people interact

both with other foreigners and with locals (whether of Belgian descent or not) may differ widely.

To understand whether it is appropriate to speak about a community of expatriates, a sound approach could consist in the investigation of expatriates' sense of community, defined as the feeling of "belonging to a group or a community based upon the perception of similarity among members and where reciprocal relations facilitate the satisfaction of individual needs" (Maya-Jariego and Armitage, 2007: 744). This article represents a first exploratory attempt to answer two questions:

Q1: Who forms the Expat community?

Q2: How do Brussels stakeholders contribute in creating this sense of community and do they succeed in doing so?

To do this, over a 6-month period in Brussels I conducted 30 structured in-depth interviews with young (23-35) professional expatriates from 25 different European<sup>1</sup> countries, as well as 3 in-depth interviews with key people. In addition, I made a textual analysis of paper publications specially catering to Expats (see Appendix). The analysis of the interviewees' point of view made it possible to go beyond a theoretical understanding of the Expat phenomenon, defining what an Expat is and clarifying the Expats' sense of belonging to a community in an empirical way.

## Defining Expats

### *Low- vs. high-skilled migrants*

A possible approach to answer to Question 1 is to highlight the Expats' particularities by differentiating them from common migrants. Brussels, like many European capitals, is the destination of considerable immigration flows. Generally speaking, this immigration is characterised by low levels of qualification and socio-economic status, which evidently contrast with the Expats' situation. Looking at the interviewees' profiles, which provide a good survey of the average Expat, we discover that, with just two exceptions, all are from families with a good social and cultural level, where at least one of the parents has a university diploma. They all hold at least a bachelor's degree, and the majority one or two master degrees. They all speak several or many languages, and almost all had other experience abroad before coming to Brussels. Indeed, Expats are considered educated people who go to Brussels not because they are motivated by basic needs, but rather by professional reasons or because they seek an experience abroad. Migrants, on the other hand, are perceived as people who are obliged to leave their countries because of the tough life and work conditions in their homeland:

(I feel) More an Expat, because I think an immigrant is somebody who doesn't really have the choice to come back and I know I have the choice (interviewee from Poland, 1).

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<sup>1</sup> For this work, it was preferable to restrict the analysis to European countries, in the hypothesis that high-level mobility from other continents might follow different schemes and arise from different motivations with respect to European citizens.

(I do not consider myself) a migrant, no: I am here because I like it (...). I didn't come here because in my country I can't find a job, in my country I would live better than here, I came to get experience (interviewee from Czech Republic).

Expats seem to represent a sort of "positive" immigration (although sometimes annoying for the changes it entails in Brussels urban environment), in contrast with the "negative" traditional immigration, which is sometimes the target of xenophobia, stereotyped as potentially violent, prone to crime and hardly or not at all integrated. Interestingly, this differentiation is applied not only to visible migrants (like those coming from Africa or the Far East), but to EU migrants as well. This can be seen in comparisons between the perceptions of low-skilled and high-skilled migrants from Eastern Europe: whereas the former are considered to be violent and involved in criminal activities, the latter are accused at most of being noisy during the night.

As a matter of fact, this division has also a spatial connotation, confirming that individuals do not locate themselves in the city randomly, but rather add their own territorialisation mode to the existing social construction of urban space (Cailliez, 2007): low-skilled migrants, especially but not only those from North-Africa, concentrate in specific neighbourhoods. Often, long-established Expats and estate agencies recommend newcomers to avoid these areas (the classical advice one may receive when looking for an apartment in Brussels is on the order of: "do not go there, it is in a North Africa area").

Consequently, migrants and expatriates do not seem to get in touch as they have different biographies, different links to their country of origin, and obviously a totally different perception of Belgium and their future there. In Ans Persoons' words<sup>2</sup>:

The only difference that I make is between people who came here in the 60s or in the 70s, mostly to do dirty work (...), and people who came here because they had a job in the European institutions. (...) they don't really get in touch (...). They are two groups (...).

However, the strong differentiation between traditional migrants and Expats does not automatically imply a better integration in the Belgian societies by the latter, but rather the opposite. As for the local residents:

Belgians tend to dismiss (high-skilled migrants) as remote and temporary eurocrats and expats – with a probably exploitative relationship to the city (...). Lately, negativity towards these European foreigners in the city has only grown (Favell, 2008: 49).

Many Bruxellois see Expats as privileged and high-salaried people. They are annoyed by the urban architectural transformations to create the physical spaces that host the EU institutions and are worried by the increase in real estate prices due to the Expats' growing demand (Bernard, 2008). Regarding their social status at least, Expats are often seen as a separate community.

This said, a definition of Expat might require considerations that go beyond a person's nationality or mobility schemes, and imply social status, education level and profession.

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<sup>2</sup> Ans Persoons works at the Brussels Europe Liaison Office and is one of my key interviewees.

### Time-frame of the Expats' stay in Brussels

An element to consider when distinguishing between migrants and Expats is the time frame of their stay in Brussels. Expats generally tend to remain in Brussels for a limited period of time. This is confirmed by the interviewees, who usually see their experience in Brussels as strictly temporary (from some months to about 4 years). Only four of them are prepared to live in Brussels for the rest of their lives, and it is significant that all four have their family or partner with them in the capital city:

Here you know that people are there for a temporary time, at least, the people that my job makes me meet: I know they are here for a short period of time, say 3-4 years, and they are going to leave most of the times; or maybe they are here only for a year and then they leave; or for a stage of 6 months, and then they leave. So the feeling here is that everything is temporary, everything is in transition (interviewee from Malta).

Nevertheless, a more careful analysis shows that this parameter may be too vague to be considered as an element of differentiation among traditional migrants and Expats. Firstly, it remains to be shown that traditional migrants stay in Brussels for prolonged periods: how many of them actually remain in the city and take part in a foreign community and how many just pass through before they go to other countries or back home? Secondly, even though the average perception confirms the idea of a very high turnover among Expats, it is also true that some of them eventually remain in Brussels for years and years, either for sentimental or professional reasons. As highlighted by Ans Persoons, there are professionals who come to Brussels with the idea of remaining for a short period but then spend their entire life there: "They want to go back to their countries after they retire, but then they realise that Belgium is their country". Are they considered (and do they consider themselves) Expats or rather integrated EU migrants? According to the interviewees, many Expats who have remained in Brussels in a stable way still perceive themselves as living a temporary experience, and some dream about returning home when they retire, as exemplified by the following quotation:

How long will I stay you mean? That's a good question. Something of which I think about regularly. For the time being I'm here, for sure I won't stay here for the rest of my life, it's something provisory, it's related to professional and private life at the same time. Sometimes I think time is going forward... (interviewee from Finland, 1, working permanently in the Commission).

Again, further investigation is needed in order to analyse the temporal schemes of Expats and traditional migrants. In any case, the limited temporal horizon of Expats in Brussels is confirmed by the fact that some Expats, seeing themselves as temporary migrants, refuse to make the effort to learn French or Dutch. It is actually surprising to discover that many people enrolled in French schools at very basic learning levels have already spent 3 or 4 years in Brussels. Of course, not speaking the languages of the country they live in hampers the Expats' ability to integrate with Belgians. However, unlike low-skilled migrants, they do not seem to be expected to learn French or Dutch. This is confirmed by the publications analysis: with the exception of *Expats in Brussels* (both in English and French) and *Agenda* (which also has some articles in Flemish), all publications are in English, which in fact is the Ex-

pat community's language. Some advertisements even highlight that the advertised shop or agency personnel speak English. "If you already know a foreign language, Belgium is an excellent place to maintain and improve your linguistic skills", we read in *Newcomer* (Autumn 2006: 105), both because there are large national communities and because "English-language books, videos and DVDs are widely available in libraries and shops in Belgium" (*ivi*: 116). In other words, the possibility for a life in a new country without having to learn its language is an incentive to go there, even though it implicitly means that Expats who cannot speak the local languages will likely create their interpersonal relationships within the Expat community alone.

One of the main consequences of a temporary stay is the difficulty, felt by both Belgians and Expats, to invest emotionally in interpersonal relationships with people who will probably leave within a short while. Expats, however, are all in the same situation, usually meet at the work place, and find it easier to frequent other expatriates. On the contrary, when an effort to go beyond the invisible barriers between the Belgian and the Expats communities is required, often there is no wish to do so:

It is funny, I don't have any Belgian friends and I don't have any foreign friend who would have Belgian friends: Belgians stick with each other, they don't really want to make friends within the foreigners, because foreigners are here only temporarily (interviewee from Slovenia).

If I was living here a long time then I would probably try to integrate more with Belgian people, to spend more time with them. But now it's a transitory thing for me, yea, I'm not going to stay here for a long time. It's hard to get to know Belgians if you are not working with Belgians, and I think Brussels is quite divided (interviewee from the United Kingdom).

Therefore, at both an interpersonal and socio-economic level, Expats are perceived as a separate community.

### Profiling Expats

*Overall Expats appear to be a special subgroup of immigrants characterised by a high level of education and a relatively high professional status, as summed up in the abstracts below:*

Highly educated, between 25 and 35, here for a limited time, quite extroverted, he (the Expat) likes to socialise, he likes to see new things, maybe not career driven, I don't think that all the people here are career driven, I know people goal driven and other people who are here to make an experience, and most people don't plan to stay here, most people want to stay here for a period and then to go back home (...). And if you meet people down here, they wear their suits, they speak this Eurolanguage, which if you don't know it currently is very hard to understand what people talk about, so that forms a kind of subculture (interviewee from Sweden).

On the basis of the interviewees' descriptions, Expats usually present the following characteristics:

- job driven;
- in Brussels for a short period;
- highly educated;
- group in an international community and seem to be very sociable;
- usually have minimum contacts with Belgians;
- often do not speak French;
- usually work in EU affairs and the related environment;
- have high wages;
- quite young.

Some of the perceptions listed above, however, are especially problematic. The fact, for instance, that Expats are meant to enjoy high wages seems to be a stereotype due to a misleading identification of all Expats with the minority who do work in the European institutions. A large number of Expats actually work underpaid in NGOs and private consulting firms. Moreover, a considerable number of Expats are unpaid *stagiaires*.

A second point which seems open to criticism is the Expats' perceived youth. Actually, a great number of professionals are definitely older, and have established their life and their family in Brussels.

Finally, identifying Expats exclusively with those who work in the EU institutions gives a narrow view of the expatriates' reality, as this group is also formed by artists, scientific researchers, engineers, etc., as well as by the families of many who have a stable professional position. In this sense, the publications analysed contribute to this imprecise idea as they usually place the accent on Brussels European identity and its role as "capital of Europe". However, it is difficult to underestimate the role of the EU institutions in attracting high-skilled migrants and consequently characterising Brussels Expat community. Among the interviewees, only two of them do not work in the EU environment and the related organisations. The majority studied economics, political science or European affairs, and found in Brussels the possibility to work in their field. Moreover, all of them generally refer to the Expat community as based on the European institutions.

These data seem to confirm Florida's (2002) theory about cities attracting power: Brussels is attractive mainly (not exclusively, of course, but mainly) for those who are interested in EU affairs and lobbying, and its expatriate community would have a dominant number of this kind of people<sup>3</sup>. This consideration leads to the conclusion that, whether it may be true that Expats are often not attached to Brussels as the place they would like to be, it is misleading to affirm that they could go anywhere:

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<sup>3</sup> In the same way as Milan attracts people interested in fashion, Barcelona in architecture, etc. Expatriate presence in a city may also be professionally very heterogeneous: Dublin, for example, with its numerous English schools and its policy to attract corporate headquarters, is the temporary destination for thousands of young people from all over the world and from different extractions and backgrounds.



not only did they choose Brussels, but also they often have to go there because Brussels is the only place that can offer the professional opportunities or experience they are seeking.

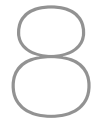
### **A preconceived notion of Expat**

#### *Promoting Brussels for Expats*

In order to describe the image of the Expat provided to newcomers, I will now discuss the publications analysed. *Welcome to Brussels*, *Newcomer*, *Expat survival guide* and *Expats in Brussels* provide specific information about all the topics that newcomers may find useful: accommodation, education, health, transport, banks, culture, leisure activities, etc. *Newcomer* and *Expats in Brussels* are very much detailed: the latter in particular is a 300-page guide with an impressive amount of information and useful addresses. This material is all the more relevant since newcomers need to orientate themselves in their new urban environment and familiarise with it (Cailliez, 2007).

Expats represent a great source of income for Brussels, so public and private organisations have an interest in investing in promotion that gives a positive image of the city and helps Expats settle in. Even though at an urban scale the relation between Brussels and the European Union and its institutions is often controversial, the marketing of Brussels is strictly linked to its role as "Capital of Europe", which is reflected in attractiveness policies at both the local and international scale (Calay, 2007). The very volume of this information offered may be seen as evidence that many organisations make a profit out of attracting foreigners. A guide like *Expats in Brussels* is so complete and precise that it is difficult for other guides to provide additional information. If the only purpose of all this material were to inform foreigners, *Expats in Brussels* could be adopted as an official guide and financed by the public administration. On the contrary, it is the only publication among those mentioned that sells for a considerable price. When it is compared with *Newcomer*, *Together magazine* or the *Expat survival guide*, the reason for both the price difference and the abundance of information becomes clear: about the half the pages of these publications are filled by advertisements. A brief review of these advertisements gives an idea of the stakeholders prospering with Expats: relocation services, accommodation agencies, hotels, residences, restaurants and food shops, laundry services, sport and wellness clubs, childcare and schools (all international), post-graduate colleges, language schools, banks and insurance companies, recruitment agencies and career services, churches, travel agencies, airlines companies, car rentals and sellers, foreign magazines and newspapers, etc. As Cailliez (2007) notes, the existence of different interests also produces different and not fully corresponding descriptions of the city.

On a very general plan, the presence of educated, middle- and upper-class foreigners in Brussels is a benefit to the city, creating a virtuous circle: the more people keep coming to Brussels and have a good experience, the more they attract new people by promoting the city informally, by inviting their friends at home to join them, by family reunifications (thus confirming the existence and functioning of migrants' informal networks; see Urry, 2002 and 2003; Cass et al., 2005). Moreover, Expats



have families who come for visits, which creates a continuous tourist flow. Huge economic interests are at stake around Expats, and it is natural that public and private organisations try to attract them.

To do this, a simple strategy seems to be employed repeatedly, a simple message is diffused explicitly or implicitly (at a narrative<sup>4</sup> level): “Belgium might not be the place where you want to live, but you are an important professional, so we will compensate for your inconvenience by taking care of you and offering you all the comforts you need to feel at home in our prestigious city”. So first an amount of useful information about Brussels and its services is made available; secondly an institution like the Brussels-Europe Liaison Office works to help newcomers settle down and integrate in the city; thirdly, an entire economic system offers its services specially designed for foreigners; and lastly, the community of those who have already settled down respond to people’s social needs.

Going through the publications, this approach is easily recognisable. If almost all the interviewees express the idea that, for one reason or another, Brussels is a place they do not really like and at the same time the place where they have to be, in the documents analysed the city is presented as a place with light and shadows, but on the whole cosy and stimulating. Most of all, Brussels is presented as the capital of Europe, referring to the 2001 Treaty of Nice. This is what we read at the very beginning of *Brussels. Yours to discover*:

Your favourite. Brussels, capital of the kingdom of Belgium is also the capital of Europe (...). This cosmopolitan city that loves good food lives life its way and expresses itself in a style very much its own: sometimes rebellious and mischievous, sometimes thoughtful and composed, but always very likeable. Despite its European dimension and despite all the different languages spoken of every street, Brussels is still inspired by a very “village-like” spirit (*Brussels. Yours to discover*: 3).

The *Expat survival guide* is even more explicit:

It is flat and boring, overcrowded, always rains and torn apart by the language conflict. (...) Just some of the usual misconceptions about Belgium, (...) home to the European Union, the self-proclaimed capital of Europe (*Expat survival guide*: 4).

*Newcomer’s* articles are along the same line, although with a soberer tone:

Welcome to Belgium, land of hospitality. (...) The country may not be what you expected, but it’s likely to win your heart. Belgium has welcomed expatriates for more than five centuries. Its tradition of hospitality and tolerance date back to the middle ages (...). Recognising the importance of attracting foreign talent, the Belgian government makes an effort to welcome expatriates and deal with their needs. A special office (Brussels-Europe Liaison Office (...)) provides expatriates with a free advisory services, covering everything (...). The country’s deep-rooted ex-

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<sup>4</sup> Here I use the term “narrative” to indicate those hidden arguments that underlie factual declarations and reveal the presence of an inner persuasion. They often are the consequence of personal values or implicit beliefs that are taken for granted.

patriate community provides a vast network of information and services for newcomers. (...) It's not just business that is booming. Brussels consistently scores high on quality of life (...; *Newcomer*, Autumn 2006: 5).

Concerning leisure activities, Brussels is presented as a stimulating city, even though, as Expats who have spent some years in it confirm, one needs to know it well to find out what is on:

Even if the weather is miserable, you can spend the weekends taking in the superb museums, visiting eclectic interiors or discovering quirky Belgian design. The only problem is that Brussels reveals its secrets reluctantly, and word-of-mouth is sometimes the only way to find out about what to see (*Newcomer*, Autumn 2006: 16).

Meeting places for Expats are advertised. The *Together magazine*, for example, has a survey called "the places to be", with pictures of smiling beautiful people having fun accompanying the addresses and the short descriptions of the events one can find there. Events devoted to Expats are frequent: "Meet expats in the real world at Expatica Speed Date events..." (*Expats survival guide*: 59). On-line dating sites are also promoted:

Expatica date! Where expats click. Europe's only online expat dating site. (...) you've made the move, now get out and enjoy yourself (*Expats survival guide*: 59).

After all the information about how to settle in Brussels and enjoy the city, useful tips on leaving Brussels are also offered, thus closing the Expat's "natural" moving cycle and confirming the high foreigner turnover: "Selling up and moving on. You bought a house in Belgium, now the time has come to move on" (*Newcomer*, Autumn 2006: 41).

#### *Constructing an image of the Expat*

The cited documents explicitly address Expats, already in their titles: *Together magazine*, *Dedicated to Bruxpats&business people in Brussels*, *Expats survival guide*, *Expats in Brussels*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "expat" is an informal synonym of expatriate. The fact that the analysed publications use the word "expat" instead of expatriate, or even more informal words like "Bruxpat", reveals a familiarity which by itself already seems to go in the direction of creating a community spirit, identification and sense of belonging. It is like winking at foreigners and saying: "if you come here, you will be one of us, one of the club". As Zanfrini (2004) maintains, the typology used to organise and administratively define migration phenomena reflects the expectations and the interests of the target society. This means that every target society divides its immigrants and labels them, establishing with each (artificial) group a precise social distance. By using the word *Expats* the examined publications stress the separation between migrants and expatriates, even linguistically, in order to attribute a diverse value to each group.

Indeed, articles and advertisements focus on high status professionals, transmitting the message: "we take care of you providing the highest level of services". Some of the many examples:

Marriott executive apartments. Brussels European quarter. Welcome to the Finest Executive Apartments in Brussels! When you need to stay longer... «Home, Away from Home» (*Newcomer*, Autumn 2006: 26).

Expatplus. A healthy decision. Let us take care of your health care needs, while you settle in Belgium. Expatplus has been specifically designed for expats like you (*Expat survival guide*: 29).

Euromut health care. Live, we take care about the rest. It is essential that you receive the best health care advice and customer service (...).  
Euromut – The Expatriates Best Choice (*Expat survival guide*: 47).

Advertisements and articles emphasise the professional facet of their readers, or the fact that they are highly demanding customers with special needs. An Italian bank uses a solidarity rhetoric to promote its services: “As Expats, which bank can take care of our financial affairs? Who understands an expat better than another expat?” (*Newcomer*, Autumn 2006: 78).

All these contents rely on the idea that there is a defined Expat community in which newcomers can immediately recognise, just because:

- they have their own guides (as the ones analysed) and publications (as the *Together magazine* or the highly popular *The Bulletin*);
- they are addressed as Expats, as the titles of many of these publications do;
- they have at their disposal, limited only by their spending capacity, every possible dedicated service;
- they can use a common language - English;
- they have physical and virtual meeting places where it is easy to socialise with other Expats.

The document analysis shows that there is a certain number of *narratives* at play in the communication towards expatriates:

- “It is a great experience to explore other countries”
- “It is nice to meet different people”
- “In Brussels it is easy to meet people”
- “You are a professional, you deserve much, you have the right to pretend”
- “Being an Expat you will enter in a world of opportunities”

This way, newcomers are somehow invited immediately to define themselves in a social role, as a very powerful image of what an Expat should be is immediately transmitted:

- cosmopolitan, open to diversity and multicultural;
- sociable and friendly;
- career-driven or at least job-oriented;
- exigent in demanding dedicated services and personnel able to speak in English;

- earning good money;
- willing to “join the club”.

This image is implicit and is conveyed by a very peculiar use of the language, a specific type of advertisements, and narratives.

Interestingly, interviewees express a *strong adherence to this described image*, either implicitly (narratives 4 and 5, above) and more often explicitly (narratives 1 to 3, but also narrative 5, above). They often repeat in their own words the recognised narratives and adopt them as their own opinion. Nonetheless, it must be added, that a minority of the interviewees provide a critical description of the Brussels Expat environment, suggesting that this adherence to a stereotyped view of how an Expat should be and think is in fact a socialisation system, a way to feel part of the Expat community.

### Identifying as an Expat

Even though it is not possible to deepen the topic here, Expats have their rituals (like the “happy hour” after work), their language (the so called *Eurolanguage* or *Euro-english*, notorious for being quite different from proper English), their status symbols (suits and dresses, European institutions and companies badges, etc.), their meeting places (special squares, bars, but also conferences, events, etc.), their dedicated publications and web sites, etc. Some of these elements help provide newcomers with an idea of the Expat identity, of how an Expat should be. I will now verify if these elements actually succeed in creating a sense of community by analysing interviewees’ declarations.

Ans Persons describes the Expat community enthusiastically:

I think it’s the realisation of the European Community in real, because you see people living together, mixing up, sharing experiences (...), there are so many nationalities here in Brussels living together, that’s what all Europe is about (B: 193-197).

Some interviewees share her opinion:

here it’s like a melting pot, everything comes together, (...) this is like a mosaic of cultures (interviewee from Finland, 2).

Nevertheless, they also show a more multi-faceted and sceptical opinion:

Do you know the publication “The Bulletin”? (...) When you read it, it makes you believe that there is like an international community, but I think there are many national communities. I know that I’m an expatriate, but I don’t have this kind of community feeling of being an Expat. (...) I wouldn’t say that all the Expats are one homogeneous group. I would say that there are many grouping (...). I see the Expat as smaller groups, not as one big group, but I also see that there is a certain Expat culture as such, which is different from the one they have at home, so the Finns here are different from the Finns at home (interviewee from Finland 2).

According to this interviewee, there are many groups inside the Expat community even though there is also a common cultural layer, or at least a common multicultural predisposition, which makes it possible for all Expats to stay together.

Other interviewees focus on individual personality more than on the sense of belonging to the Expat community:

I should stay together with all the Expats and feel united to them because they are in the same situation as I am? I don't know. You can keep a conversation with someone, "why are you here?", the same conversation of every party (...). If this is the empathy that I am supposed to have, it is a little boring, (...) because everyone tells the same story. I prefer to stay with people who are not in the same situation as I am, or to meet people from here (Belgians), or from wherever, but people who do not do the same as I do (interviewee from Spain).

That's why I wouldn't go to stagier parties, assistant parties, and stuff like that: it's always the stereotypic questions: "where are you from, what are you doing here, who do you know in the Commission", and maybe one of the last question is "what is your name" or something like that, and then the last question, you know, the social question is "what about the weather?" (...): it's very superficial, and it's boring (...; interviewee from Rumania).

Others simply refuse to identify with the Expat community:

I didn't have any particular need to meet Expat people, I can meet them already at work, some of them became my friends, but I'm not searching for their company in particular. I meet people, Belgian and others, that's it, I didn't have a particular necessity to go to Place Lux (one of the place where Expats usually meet for the after hour) or whatever (interviewee from Finland, 1).

The Expat's self-perception may vary widely and there are also people who do not even feel comfortable with the "expatriate" notion itself. Claire-Lise Dautry<sup>5</sup>, ostensibly showing a strong European identity, maintains that in Europe speaking about expatriates is not correct, for distances among countries are short and cultural differences are not pronounced:

I expatriated, but I do not feel an expatriate (...), because when you are French, you do not feel an expatriate in Belgium: here is Europe. I have just spent five years in China and over there there is an expatriate community (...). I do not feel neither an expatriate nor an immigrant, I feel European, a Southern French detached by its headquarter in a city which is at one hour from Paris. I am a detached professional. In "expatriation" there is the word "ex" and I don't feel at all "ex".

These testimonies, just few examples among many others, show that speaking of an Expat community is quite an arbitrary choice, as the sense of community seems

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<sup>5</sup> Claire-Lise Dautry is Director of the French school *Alliance Française Bruxelles* and is one of my key interviewees.

to be weak and not shared universally. Moreover, it seems to be based more on the fact of being in the same moving condition than on a sense of membership.

### **Conclusions**

The question opened by Claire-Lise Dautry is not solved. I have shown that Brussels stakeholders produce a rhetoric about Expats and that while some interviewees accept it passively, others do not identify with such a superficial model. Thus further investigation is still needed to deepen the topic of Expat self-perception, especially among those who have settled in Brussels for many years and who, although technically expatriates, might not define themselves as Expats. Nonetheless, it is now possible to provide a first answer to the two research questions.

#### *Question 1: Who forms the Expat community?*

The Expat community is formed by highly skilled, highly educated migrants, of a middle or good social level, who are professionally oriented. They are perceived to be quite young on the average, and they usually stay in Brussels for a limited period, even though a minority of them, normally the most mature ones, have decided to settle in the city on a permanent basis. They are thought to hold important professional positions and receive high wages, but this perception is an effect of the incorrect correlation between EU institution officers and Expats.

#### *Question 2: How do Brussels' stakeholders contribute in creating this sense of community and do they succeed in doing so?*

Brussels' stakeholders use a communication directed towards Expats which is based on a number of identity assumptions about what an Expat is, the professional position he covers and what his needs are. Nevertheless, the attempt to close all expatriates in a community seems to be quite artificial and to provide just a superficial image of a more complex identity reality. Even though Expats may group together, the nature of this grouping is not homogeneous. Moreover, the sense of membership in the community is often doubtful, as some Expats use strictly personal criteria to choose the company they keep.

## Appendix

Publications that cater to expatriates are widespread in Brussels. Some of them are directly produced by public financed institutions (like the Ministry of the Brussels-Capital Region or by Brussels International-Tourism & Congress) or private entities. The majority are guides that provide useful information to foreigners either wishing to come to Brussels or already living in the city.

The documents taken into consideration are:

*Mini-Bru. Statistical survey of the Brussels-Capital Region*, published by the Ministry of the Brussels-Capital Region (available for free);

*Welcome to Brussels*, published by the Brussels-Europe Liaison Office (available for free);

*Brussels. Yours to discover*, one of the many thematic guides published by Brussels International-Tourism & Congress, the Office de Promotion du Tourisme Wallonie-Bruxelles and the Tourist Office of Flanders (available for free);

*Agenda/Cinema. Out and about in Brussels*, a weekly magazine which provides information about events and cinema programs in the capital; written in three languages (Flemish, French and English) and consequently supported by the Flemish government and the Flemish Community Commission, is the only document considered that does not exclusively address expatriates;

*Newcomer. An introduction to life in Belgium*, a guide which has the form of a magazine and is re-edited every six months, sold (for €3) as supplement to the Expats-dedicated magazine "The Bulletin" (the issues considered are Autumn 2006 and Spring 2007);

*Together magazine. Dedicated to Bruxpats&business people in Brussels*, a privately financed magazine first published in 2007 (available for free);

*Expat survival guide. Your essential guide to living in Belgium*, published by Expatica, a company that provides information and communication services for expatriates in several European cities, such as a well-known website ([www.expatica.com](http://www.expatica.com)) which offers an electronic rental home finder and a meeting forum (available for free);

*Expats in Brussels. The practical guide to settling and living in Brussels*, a bilingual (English and French) yearly guide (already in its 8<sup>th</sup> edition); printed in book format. It is probably the most complete guide for Expats (€15).



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