RE-CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY BETWEEN PLACE AND SPACE. THE CASE OF HIGHLY SKILLED EU MIGRANTS TO BUCHAREST

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*A*pproaching identity in a constructivist manner (Weigert et al. 1986), we conceive of it as embedded in social interactions with people and collectivities and consider international migration as a vehicle to change such contexts (Dinesen 2013). Therefore, we explore identity transformations in international migrants, focusing on the case of highly skilled EU immigrants to Bucharest. The place is peculiar as a wealthy enclave in the poorest region in the European Union. Our target immigrants may be atypical, but they have the advantage of being able to better control and influence their context (Favell 2008). We document a subtle process of change in reference to self-definitions and evaluations of alterity. Through analysing interviews with high-skilled immigrants (HSI) in Bucharest, we discuss the places of agency and structure in the self-definitions of migrants. We argue that structural elements are filtered by the direct experiences of HSIs, while their agency and personal characteristics make them less exposed to constraints of any kind. At the same time, we contend that interactions at the destination contribute to the redefinition of original expectations and plans. Homemaking strategies act as a substitute for maintaining the identity shaped by the culture of origin.

Keywords: Highly skilled immigrants; expats; identity; homemaking.

INTRODUCTION

Identity is key to human societies and individuals and defines our ways of interacting with others (Jenkins 2008). As "a socially constructed definition of an individual" (Weigert *et al.* 1986, 34), identity depends on the surrounding social and cultural context. This makes it a process, not a given (Jenkins 2008), and it is relevant to inspect its changes when the context changes. For immigrants, the migration process implies a change in the surrounding context (Dinesen 2013; Voicu 2014),

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meaning that re-constructing identity is part of their coping strategies and patterns of integration, a redefinition of everyday life, and a potential area of interest when conceiving integration policies.

In the past 15 years, identity change in the case of highly skilled immigrants (HSI) has become a field of interest (Kehonen 2008). Understanding it enables assessing needs in the fields of social (Czaika and Parsons 2018), organisational (Chiswick and Taengnoi 2007) and development policies (Cerna 2014), and can be placed in the flourishing literature on HSIs (Bauböck 2007; Fechtter 2007; King 2002; Kunz 2016; Meier 2014; Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014).

Different categories of HSIs received attention, and were labelled over time as 'expats', 'expatriates', 'eurostars', etc. (Kunz 2016). The simple reference to being 'skilled' raises debates on whether the 'skills' are or not covered by formal education or to which extend graduation of university leads to high skills (Hercog and Sandoz 2018). In the following, we use HSIs as a proxy for people educated at tertiary level. This is the typical agent that transfers knowledge from a society to another (Kou *et al*. 2020), and is subject of policies to attract talent (Cerna 2014; Hercog and Sandoz 2018), therefore fulfilling the basic idea beyond identifying someone as being "high-skilled immigrant". Nevertheless, a talented football player, or a top-star in show-biz are highly-skilled, but do not necessary fulfil our requirement of being tertiary graduates. Such situations are not covered by our inquiry, which simply focuses on EU-citizens graduates of tertiary education that live to Bucharest.

Most studies devoted to international migration focus on the East–West and South–North movement of people. At the same time, with few exceptions (e.g., Andrejuk 2017; Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2020a; Piekut 2013), there is a gap in knowledge concerning intra-European highly skilled migration to former communist societies. This paper brings a new perspective and inspects the construction of identity in the case of highly skilled intra-European migrants to Bucharest. In the forefront stands the interplay between social and personal identity. We hypothesize that their resulting combination is dependent on the position of immigrants within the broader Romanian society, and on its dynamics from pre-migration representations to post-migration coping strategies, including homemaking practices, senses of place and the development of the transnational habitus. We argue that while maintaining their status as "migrants of privilege" (Kunz 2016), such migrants face integration into a middle class strata of the local society, that acts as non-migrant bubble. HSIs develop an identity pattern that combines transnational elements with an elitist positioning of the native bubble that incorporates them, and with a flavour of their country of origin that manifests through homemaking practices. The results presented here are based on a set of 11 interviews with such migrants, conducted in 2017–2018. The sample was selected in such a way that they have a deeper submerging into the society, with necessary interactions with the local institutions. Therefore, the criteria included having spent at least one year in Romania, having a family of at least a partner, and preferably having children.

As result, we explore a double shift in understanding migration-related processes. On the one hand, there is the direction of the flow, from better developed countries to poorer ones. On the other hand, there is the initial status of the individuals implied in the flow, referring to highly skilled individuals. In addition, given the relational nature of identity, we document its process of formation and change in a context that proves opposite to initial expectations of the HSIs. Their agency is constrained and empowered in an environment rich in opportunities for up-mobility, but also rich in native peers that also experience high status.

In the following, we start by addressing the main conceptual streams that we use. We discuss identity and its formation and change, viewing it in connection with international migration. We review the literature on transnational identity and the one on homemaking practices among immigrants to formulate our hypothesis regarding highly skilled migrants from other EU member states to Bucharest. A brief data and methods section is followed by introducing the findings, first by depicting the stories of our interviewees, and second by looking at the communalities that are to be observed in these stories. The final discussion sheds light on implications for existing knowledge, further research, and policymaking.

IDENTITY AND IDENTITIES

Broadly speaking, the term 'identity' refers to who or what an entity is, in relation to a defined reference point: either related to group membership or by considering the roles played by individual or intrapersonal characteristics (Hogg *et al.* 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). Rather than being a property, identity is a process, always under scrutiny and redefinitions (Hall 2000), in the sense that it is constantly being shaped (Jenkins 2008). Individuals are active in reference to their identity, as it is the result of assigning and defining differences (Brettell and Sargent 2006) between individuals, between categories, and so on. It is a result of the interplay between individual action and social contexts. Social networks of parents, friends and colleagues are important agencies for identity construction (Madsen and Van Naerssen 2003, 62).

Based on the distinction between ingroups and outgroups, two types of identity are salient: social identity (defined in an intergroup setting based on belonging and differentiation) and personal identity (focused on the roles played by individuals within the groups in which they belong) (Hogg *et al.* 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). Both variants of identity act as interfaces or linkage points between individuals (and their behaviour) and society (social structure) (Hogg *et al.* 1995). Social structures are resources for individual action and provide the interplay between agency and structure (Giddens 1984). In this context, the social environment becomes important for identity construction. Identity emerges as a consequence of an "inner conversation", seen as a "conversation about reality", which is "constitutive of our concrete singularity", and "determines our being-in-the-world" (Archer 2000, 318).

Relations with others, cultural norms and agency become key for understanding identity and its dynamics.

IDENTITY AND MIGRATION

Such a perspective is easily retrieved in the analysis of identity of HSIs. For instance, Adams and Van de Vijver (2015) distinguish three types of identity: relational (given by the roles played by individuals), personal (refers to intrapersonal aspects, such as skills and values), and social (dependent on membership to various groups). The authors underline the higher degree of freedom held by HSIs, compared to other types of migrants, when it comes to their adaptation to the host society. This brings forward, based on Näsholm (2012), the idea that personal identity is especially important for HSIs, for giving them a sense of continuity (Adams and Van de Vijver 2015). Relational and social identity are constructed in the sense of the above-discussed inner conversation about reality, being dependent on the environment.

During migration, this leaves us with an anchor (social identity) and two relational elements. As migration implies changes in the social environment in which individuals carry on with their day-to-day lives, and challenges their frameworks of reference, it is expected to impact the processes of identity construction that refer to the relational elements (Butcher 2010). On one hand, belonging acts as a mediator between identity and migration (Gilmartin 2008). Belonging, either to social groups or places, is drawing bridges between individuals and external points of reference. If migration changes the relevant groups, changes in identity are likely to occur. For instance, if HSIs integrate in migrant communities, they keep a reference group that involves a framework common to pre-migration situation. *Au contraire*, if integrating in a stratum of the local community, the changes might be dramatical.

On the other hand, immigration is associated with matters of integration, seen as the adjustment of individuals to the social norms of the destination, especially given the high diversity of migration as a phenomenon (Kofman 2005). As a matter of adaptation and reshaping one's identity on new grounds, integration becomes a way to change the framework of reference.

Even the stable anchor is subject to change. Preston (2002) argues that personal identity is continuously shaped through life experiences. Migration connects origin and destination, and both become active in processes of identity (re)construction, reinforcing one another (the experience at the destination is influenced by the status at the origin and the purpose associated with migration).

Before further pursuing such argumentation for the case of HSIs, it is useful to note that national identity continues to be relevant, and acts as a barrier for newcomers of different races, ethnicities or religions (Fukuyama 2007). Although there is a certain correspondence between geopolitical borders and national identity, geopolitical borders are rather rigid, whereas identity borders are more fluid. Thus, the continuous construction of identities leads to a permanent redefining of borders,

even though "geopolitical borders do not correspondingly adjust as often nor as easily as do identity borders" (Madsen and Van Naerssen 2003, 72). This means that despite its strong national roots, identity construction overcomes traditional patterns of defining individuals and societies, and transcends spatial setups. Therefore, when migrating within a certain common umbrella identity, such as being an EU citizen, the relation with the origin might fade and the strength of national identity should be less important, in particular when it can be compensated with a strong personal identity.

TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES

While the concept of identity traditionally has a territorial character, trans-border identities emerge, characterised by multiple belongings. The migrants carry with them their imagined communities and actively use these new communication opportunities in constructing and maintaining their identities, despite spatial dispersion (Madsen and Van Naerssen 2003, 68). The daily practices of migrants can be seen as constructing nested worlds, in other words, bringing the origin to the destination and the other way around (Salih 2002). The typical contemporary result is embeddedness in more than one society (Vertovec 2004). An intertwined social space emerges across borders and even time, while "non-unitary identities" shape a new societal landscape (Caglar 2001, 606). Non-linear (Caglar 2001), liquid migration (Engbersen *et al.* 2010) defines the process of permanently reconstructing identity.

As socialisation is linked to specific places of interaction (Piekut 2013), migration is basically a change in social scenery or in the places of reference for one's sense of self. These changes trigger efforts in managing new situations, while everyday practices become partly irrelevant in the new context. Involuntary reactions learnt in early childhood sometimes lead to different and unexpected results in the new context, being either liabilities or leading to innovative outcomes, but altogether reshaping routines and feelings of control over the surrounding reality and "taken-for-granted elements of habitus" (Huot and Rudman 2010, 75).

The concept of *transnational habitus* or a *habitus of dual orientation* (Guarnizo 1997; Vertovec 2004) brings Bourdieu's concept in the field of transnational migration, in an attempt to draw together the influences of the social environment at the origin and the destination. It impacts every aspect of migrants' lives, albeit not to the same extent for every individual (Vertovec 2004). With the mix of personalised migration experiences, shaped by life course, the pre-existing sense of personal identity and collective belonging (Vertovec 2004, 24), different and fluid transnational identities are likely to reflect the balance between representations and expectations related to both the host and home societies (Ghosh and Wang 2003, 281–282).

The constructivist approach to identity formation and change is also reflected in the case of transnational professionals through a focus on various tools employed by migrants themselves to redefine their identity. Such tools include the usage of cosmopolitanism to develop a non-national identity (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt 2017), structuring identity through the mix of relationships in the host society (Butcher 2010), or managing multiple identities, through shaping the new environment to existing personal preferences and embedding career paths as identity drivers (Peltokorpi and Zhang 2020; Scurry *et al.* 2013). The tension between structure (Ghosh and Wang, 2003; Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt 2017) and agency (Beck 2002; Pollock *et al.* 2000) is prevalent in all these approaches. It implies the interplay between social and personal identities. Our option is to conceive of identity in highly skilled migrants as a by-product of both structure and individual action. Asserting a mixed identity or one of 'mobile citizen' is an exemplar endeavour in this perspective, since it could be conceived both as proof of individualistic action to gain freedom from nationality-based identity markers and as an indication for taking the collective discourse of being HSI as the basis for self-defining.

HOMEMAKING

When it comes to forging/ constructing a sense of home, a process that is commonly associated with migration, the notion of place is fundamental, as it relates to displacement and the mechanisms of dealing with it (Butcher 2010). As re-placement or homemaking strategies are developed, migrants' identities are also expressed and brought forward. This is indicative of the fact that change is inherent, especially when differences in social contexts (brought by migration) are experienced.

As a multidimensional concept (sociocultural, emotional, relational, political), home is central for identity formation. An immigrant's identity is related to multiple home spaces, either physical or symbolic (Kinefuchi 2010), thus the importance of domestic space or lived space in migrants' experiences (Walsh 2006). The homemaking process, seen as a specific type of performing place, entails a significant material component, doubled by nonmaterial aspects, including a vast array of everyday practices (Benson and Jackson 2013). It is closely related to individuals' life courses, with specificities and vulnerabilities in different life stages (Walsh 2018). Homemaking in migration is a relation of people and things: the objects we choose in our daily lives, how we use them, which, in turn, informs the process of identity construction (Vilar Rosales 2010). However, homemaking is also a dimension rooted in social, affective and emotional aspects, making it dependent on the resources available for migrants, including networks, which are important factors in adapting to the destination (Kinefuchi 2010).

The interplay between homemaking and identity is visible when analysing homemaking strategies related to the aspects of one's identity, such as (the

performance of) masculinities, explored by Walsh (2011) in the context of British migration in Dubai. These identity markers are emphasised or downplayed to contribute to (re)creating a sense of home (Madsen and Van Naerssen 2003).

Typically, highly skilled migrants organise home around relationships with other transnational professionals and use these relationships to recreate familiarity. This is a reaction to difficulties in setting up home within the practice of geographically dissolute practices and constantly interrupted mobile social connections (Nowicka 2007). However, forming positive relationships within the host society leads to redefining home within this context and constructing identity based on connection with the host culture, without overlapping the transnational and origin identities (Butcher 2010). The quality of relations is key to understanding the trajectory that identity formation takes, in the sense of the negative – positive argument proposed by Lawler (2001) regarding the affects involved in social exchanges. Positive experiences are said to lead to stronger ties and a shared association with the place defined by such relationships. In turn, the positive affect creates premises for meaningful exchanges with the local culture, while negative experiences are likely to foster encapsulation within networks of HSIs and reinforce the social identity as a HSI or as a member of the country of origin. Embracing multiple affiliations (La Barbera 2015) can also be seen from the same perspective of mixing frameworks of reference and choosing a tailored path, in an effort to structure the multifaceted process that defines identity.

IDENTITY AND HIGHLY SKILLED MIGRANTS TO POORER REGIONS

Highly skilled immigrants are typically depicted as disposing of extensive status resources that turn them into privileged actors (Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2020b; Kunz 2016; Peltokorpi and Zhang 2020; Scurry *et al.* 2013), and enable them to develop agency regarding their own path and become a sort of societal stars (Favell 2008). Usually, their integration occurs into 'expat bubbles', with no small opening towards the host society (Fechtter 2007; Piekut 2012). Therefore, their process of re-constructing identity is normally dependent on personal status, and less on the context of the host society. Based on the arguments in the previous sections, intra-European HSIs become the depositors of strong personal identity (which enhances their agency), with a fluent national identity, while other relational and social identities depend on their positioning within the local context, and their homemaking strategies that preserve (or not) their context as it was in the country of origin.

Transnational professionals of EU citizenship who are migrating to poorer countries within the EU also find themselves in a challenging situation regarding social and personal identity, but it is different with respect to at least three perspectives.

First, their framework of reference in the country of origin is expected to set up a position of superiority as compared to the country of destination (Kunz 2020). In some ways, following the findings of Leinonen (2012), highly skilled professionals from developed societies might be represented in the host society as agents of change, and they may develop expectations accordingly to this situation, that they harness, and in which their agency is salient. Second, the setup in the destination country is also favourable for defining them as having a higher personal status compared to the locals (Andrejuk 2017; Leinonen 2012), protecting them from the fear that they pose threats to local identities. Third, in many cases, the migration experience of highly skilled migrants does not lead to ascendent social mobility (Goxe and Paris 2016). This also holds true for intra-European migrants, when discussing migration from Western societies to other Western societies (Recchi 2009). However, when migrating to a poorer society that is undergoing a process of change to develop its service sector, it is easier to transfer the skills of managing within the new social structure, since this is already familiar from the country of origin. Such an advantage of mobile European professionals to Eastern European societies is likely to favour ascendant mobility, underlying their privileged migration.

In other words, the internal discourse of highly skilled migrants should refer to a situation in which they change to a poorer structure that actually provides them a richer structure of opportunities, and puts them in an advantaged position, as compared to the locals. It is a type of downshifting that encapsulates an explicit way to grasp higher changes to gear up. Given the boost to personal position, the interplay between the three processes should lead to fostering the importance of agency, and therefore, personal identity.

OUTCOME: HIGH-SKILLED IMMIGRANTS TO BUCHAREST

Recent work on mobile EU professionals highlights the role of the city in their lives (Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2020a; Meier 2014). City becomes a space for various incorporation and place-making practices undertaken by migrants (Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2020b, 449). However, Bucharest is a highly atypical place to migrate. According to Eurostat data, in 2018 its GDP/capita was among the largest in the EU[1]. Romania has a low and flat taxation rate of 16% both for individuals and businesses, while the government controls only a third of the national GDP, that is much lower than most of the EU countries[2]. With such low taxation, the average disposable

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[1] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TGS00005/default/map?category=reg.reg_eco10.reg eco10gdp.

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/GOV_10A_EXP/default/table?lcategory=gov.gov_ gfs10.gov_10a.

income per household expressed in Euro PPS[3], indicated Bucharest's region wealthier than any other European region south of it, wealthier than any other region in Central and Eastern EU, and even as contrasted to Western rich region's such as Ile de France, where Paris is located. The same statistics indicated Bucharest in 2019 as the tenth richest such region. All other Romanian regions were among the poorest in the EU. Consequently, Bucharest was the rich capital of one of the two poorest countries in the EU, and its richness was unevenly distributed mainly towards the richer. With a vivant cultural and blooming economic life, the city attracts quite a steady flow of highly skilled migrants, particularly intra-European migrants.

Intra-EU HSIs to Bucharest come to a country that they expect to be poor, and as already argued, we expect a boost for personal identity. However, when entering a highly unequal society, we expect the HSIs to Bucharest to face a completely different world compared to their expectations. Higher social mobility remains the common trait, but the host society – particularly, the social strata that they access – is likely to be better off, compared to their expectations. It will not be as poor or less educated as they expect.

At the confluence of these tendencies, the interaction with the host society is expected to be positive, or at least above initial expectations. When accompanied by establishing some relations with locals, we expect to observe the salience of agency and personal identity, along with a revamping of social identity. The local structure of opportunities works not only in their favour, but actually favours better off individuals in the country. The situation is not new. For instance, the flat taxation at low levels was implemented starting 2004. The discrepancy between the capital city and the rest of the country has an even longer history. In other words, HSIs arrive to a city where the higher strata of society benefited for a long while from the type of redistribution that works in its immediate benefit. HSIs may face a society in which they are not on the top, but in the best case *among* those at the top. Therefore, their strong agency based on personal identity is challenged by the need to adapt the social identity in such a way that they avoid dissonance. Consequently, integrating into the upper strata of local society and interacting with native Romanians is expected to be observed.

DATA AND METHODS

The empirical data analysed consist of 11 interviews conducted in the period of 2017–2018, with European HSIs currently (at the time of the interview) living and working in Bucharest. Debates around the optimal number of interviews in qualitative research is a common place in the existing literature (Baker and Edvards eds., 2012). Answers ranged from the relative "it depends" to as low as one

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[3] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TGS00026/default/map?category=reg.reg_eco10. reg_eco10brch.

interview, and it has been showed that for basic themes, the necessary number of interviews might be 6 (Guest *et al.* 2006), 9 (Hennink *et al.* 2017), 8−9 (Hagaman *et al.* 2016). Along with these references, the intuitive criteria of saturation suggest that the set of interviews is reliable enough to draw informed conclusions with respect to our endeavour.

The team of five researchers was interested in HSIs' integration, focused on the types of contact with Romanian society and their use of services provided in Romania (e.g., healthcare, education, etc.). In the recruitment process, personal contacts were used, as well as recommendations and information resulting from desk research (forums, Facebook groups for HSIs). These broad interests were translated into a few selection criteria: the respondents had to have been in Romania for at least one year prior to the interview, they had to have their family with them (partners and children), and they had to be highly skilled non-Romanian EU citizens. While the last criterion is self-explanatory for research on European HSIs, the first two enabled us to select people with a high exposure to Romanian social services, due to the length of stay, and to the family character of their migration: having a partner and, in particular, kids increase the chances that one interacts with the healthcare system, education system, etc. In the sample, however, there was a respondent who was single and did not have any children, but he had been in Romania long enough to compensate for these missing features.

The pool of respondents reflects the distribution of occupations (entrepreneurs, corporate sector employees), whose arrival in Romania was either part of their career strategy (professional reasons), or their lifestyle strategy. Regardless of these differences among them, the central themes of the research –access to social services, language acquisition and occupational trajectory – were explored with each of them.

Among the interviewees, there were eight men, and three women, possibly due to a better connectedness of men to professional networks, and, in relation to that, to the public space at the destination. However, we have observed no gender-driven differences with respect to our focus, therefore there is no comment on such aspects within the introduction of findings.

Table no. 1

List of interviewees

Respondent	AT1	CZ1	DE1	ES1	FR1	FR2*	FR3	IT1	PL1	PT1	UK1
Age	56	35	~40	35	30	39	45	40	~42	39	~55
Gender	M	M	M	F	M	M	F	M	F	M	M
Arrival in Romania	2008	2015–2017, 2017–	2017	2009–2013, 2017–	2014	2000	2013	2001 (w. breaks)	2003	2008–2013, 2014–	1998
Motives to immigrate to Romania	Professional	Professional	Professional	Professional	Lifestyle	Lifestyle	Professional	Professional	Professional	Professional	Professional
Job	Entrepreneur	Corporate // Entrepreneur	Corporate	Teleworking // Mother	Leisure	Entrepreneur	Corporate	Corporate	Corporate	Corporate // Entrepreneur	Corporate
Current partner	AT-divorced // RO	SK	US	ES	–	RO, divorced	FR	RO	BE	RO, divorced	RO
Children	2+1	2	2	2	–	1	2	–	2	2	2
Recruitment	rec	web	rec	rec	rec	web	s.m.	s.m.	web	web	s.m.

rec = by recommendation, web = desk research (Internet), s.m.= desk research (social media).

FINDINGS: PERSONAL STORIES

PT1 came to Romania "by accident". He had no prior work migration, but he had spent stages of study abroad while he was a student. He has a large network of family, kinship, and friends who work away from his home society, Portugal. He works in the Bucharest office of one of the Big Four accounting firms. It was a huge step forward for a youngster at the beginning of his professional career. He knew nothing about Romania, except for the national football team that he watched during the 1994 US World Cup. Otherwise, Romania was an unknown country at the other end of the continent. Eight years later, Romania is a country "well connected to Western countries," which he defines as being in the middle of everything. The change in perspective is from an unexpected structure of opportunities offered by a poor society to self-defining through permanent reference to the host country.

Three months after arriving in Romania, the employer reduced all activity in the country due to the start of the 2008–2009 global recession, and PT1 was offered the chance to be the head of the office. Several job changes, marrying a Romanian, having a child, living for one year in Portugal, returning to Romania against the will of his spouse, becoming an entrepreneur, having another child and getting divorced occurred in a vivant rhythm in his life. His complex identity is made up of quite a broad network of friends (mainly Romanian), understanding the language, keeping a loose connection to Portuguese news, and thinking of himself as mainly Nordic by culture (due to a year spent in Finland during university education). PT1 has difficulties defining himself in national terms, and hesitates to call his kids Romanian, Portuguese or otherwise. He sees Romania as a country that is the same as Portugal, but with a 30-year gap.

Coming "by accident" to a poor country is common for several of our interviewees. DE1 illustrates the best downshifting in terms of country of residence. He was aiming for a top position in the same large chemical transnational company, but in Austria. The Bucharest office was offered to him as compensation, but he refused. He came to Bucharest for a short holiday with his wife, which was paid for by his employer, and they remained here due to the "Mediterranean vibe" that he continues to praise. He discovered that his "black-skin" American wife was not discriminated against as they feared; his children found a friendly environment in school. While he was part of the lower strata of the middle class in his home society, he found himself out of the blue in the top strata of society. At the time of interviewing, his migration to Romania was still recent, less than one year ago. It followed a wave of migrations driven by changing various positions with the same employer, all located in well-developed countries.

DE1 is atypical among our subjects, since he displays a strong case of segmented assimilation into a narrower elite, and has very little or almost no contact with the lower strata of society. Such an option has to be by choice. He defines himself and his family as being part of a very select bubble, with few interactions

with locals, although he does mention a Romanian couple as close friends. His social network comprises mainly couples, which may be the effect of being still recently located to Romania. His wife is also highly skilled but a housewife, which could be a consequence of reproducing a traditional German family pattern. He is hard-working, spends little time for leisure and prefers hierarchies. He regrets that his children will actually learn too little German, since they go to private English-language schools in Bucharest and use German only to communicate with him.

AT1 defines himself as an international citizen, born in Austria, "still not Romanian". He arrived in Romania following a business opportunity. He had prior work experience in various West-European societies and in two Arab countries. However, in the first stage, he and his children rejected the idea of Romania. Anyway, his children were living with his former wife. That was eight years ago. Now, he describes that moment as the best decision in his lifetime; Bucharest is the most wonderful place on Earth. He met his new wife, the partner he never dared to dream about. After spending several years as a consultant for various companies, he opened a family business, with his wife as president. They have a two-month-old daughter, adding to the two teenage children from his previous marriage. He spends time watching Romanian news, is involved in social life and follows local politics. Although he does not speak Romanian, he understands it. This place, he explains, is the most wonderful opportunity to earn money and have an excellent life. All one has to do is wait, build things and then one climbs the social ladder. Ascending mobility is obvious in his case, despite not phrasing it as such.

FR1 came to Romania following his girlfriend, with no previous experience of Romania, yet expecting a society that could provide lifestyle opportunities, being a society from Eastern Europe that was supposed to be able to develop. He came with disappointment in his home society, following the 'Charlie Hebdo' incident. In Bucharest, he discovered an environment of relatively poor leftist Romanian young adults, in their 20s, enjoying cultural consumption, with no financial pressure, and also keeping contact with the local French community.

IT1 came to Romania for the first time in 2001, while still a student within the Erasmus mobility programme. After a short period spent back home in Italy, he returned in 2002 due to a job offer. His partner is Romanian. He finds Romania to be a very conservative country. For him, common experience is the basis of identity formation: he finds that he has things in common with people who went through similar things (he refers explicitly to the Erasmus generation). Thus, in his case, the geographical reference (birth country, Europe) is not as relevant for the way he thinks about himself. He feels European, not expat or immigrant, explaining that expat is not an appropriate term because it leaves out the agency − he can plan his future as he pleases, in Romania or elsewhere. However, later in the interview, while talking about how protests are not very well organised in Romania, he uses a reference to the town he is from, Genoa, to explain his political orientation as a progressist leftist (this is how things are in Genoa). The idea that you must take an

exam to obtain citizenship is not very appealing to him. He sees similarities between people as going beyond legal and geopolitical aspects.

At the time of the interview (2017), CZ1 had been here for 10 months and was planning to stay for three years to expand his business. Even though he has established his activity in Romania, he still travels back and forth between Prague and Bucharest. He perceives a strong language barrier, rather symbolic than fuelled by Romanians' lack of knowledge of the English language, especially when dealing with the public administration. He came here with his wife and son. His wife (Slovak) is the one who usually deals with interactions with locals, as she speaks a bit of Romanian. Their son is going to kindergarten and appears to be very social and happy to be among his peers. Their temporary relocation to Romania is strictly business-related, and is not conceived as permanent – they chose Romania due to some market characteristics. Throughout his discourse, a strong attachment to his home is visible. Moreover, home, or the idea of permanent home, is in Prague – he recurrently refers to the city, not the country.

ES1 first came to Romania in 2009, following her husband. She stayed here for a few years, then returned after a break of two years. She is now in Romania with her husband and three children. They are located in Bucharest, but they also lived in Constanța. She is currently working from home, on a personal project, and her husband has a job and a salary. She talks a lot about travelling in Romania, visiting different regions, and getting to know local customs. She says that she likes going to local markets and doing her grocery shopping there, and shows knowledge of the local environment. She can compare various markets in different neighbourhoods, and define her preferences (instead of going to *Floreasca*, which is a very expensive market, it is better to go to *Obor*). Family seems to be the central notion guiding ES1, not only her husband and her children, but also her extended family. Important behaviours on this dimension are the fact that she, her husband and children usually spend their holidays in Spain, thus enabling the children to spend more time with their grandparents (her explanation). Also, she often receives packages from her mother with Spanish food or children's clothing.

UK1 came to Romania in 1998 for work. He met his wife here, and this added some stability to his plans: he remained in Romania and started his family here, whereas, had it only been the professional aspect, he would have been more mobile. He views Romania as a traditional country, but also filled with corruption and behaviours that are sometimes hard to comprehend, different mentalities, as he puts it. During the holidays, he briefly visits his mother in the UK – he goes alone, because his wife does not fly. He does not think of himself as an immigrant or expat, due to the long duration of his stay in Romania, as the mentioned terms usually involves briefer stays.

FR3 came to Romania in 2012 (at the time of the interview, she was getting close to her departure from Romania) from Egypt. She is working at a multinational company, and she gets to travel internationally as part of her job. She defines herself

as an explorer, living in a world that is too big and that needs to be discovered. She does not think about settling, but about exploring new destinations, and gathering different experiences. She travels with her family (husband and children), and she constructs a sense of stability for her children by enrolling them in French schools to ensure that they master the language.

PL1 has been living in Romania since 2003. She remembers that she first came during a holiday, and she found Romania to be a beautiful and interesting country, so it seemed like a good destination for her. Like other interviewees, she speaks about differences between people, but in her case, it seems to be something other than a cultural clash or cultural differences, and more about professional aspects that can turn out to be exploitative or about people who are willing to lie to get what they want. Along these lines, she describes the experience in Romania as a tough one.

FINDINGS: TRANSVERSAL STORIES

Mastering local language might be seen as a mandatory tool for integration. Basically, almost all interviewees (except DE1) understand Romanian enough for daily communication. Within the couple, it is important that (at least) one of the partners is able to carry out a conversation in Romanian, for practical reasons, especially when dealing with authorities or the public system in general. However, they prefer English for business and even for daily life communication. In [most?] mixed couples, English is the *lingua franca*, irrespective of whether one of the spouses is Romanian or not. However, English also becomes an identity mark for conversing with friends, even for those keen to stay a long time (if not forever) in Romania, such as AT1 or PT1. The symbolism is clear, marking not only integration with the upper-middle class, but also a certain distinction as HSI that most likely becomes important even for Romanians who are part of their social network. Beyond the preferred use of English, almost all had at least attempted to learn Romanian: DE1 and PT1 took classes but gave up because of costs or time constraints. AT1 and PT1 read Romanian language media or watch Romanian television channels to learn Romanian, and this happens even after migrating to Bucharest eight years ago.

Categories are difficult to apply to self-defined identity, as depicted in *Box 1*. For some respondents, such as UK1, defining as HSI or expat is not a good description of how they think about themselves, because it involves a very strict temporal organisation of mobility: as an expat, you tend to spend short periods of time in various destinations. This definition is seen as being rather narrow, and not convergent with the fluidity of the future (yet to be decided, destination wise).

Box 1

Escaping categories in self-defining identity

Interviewer: And how do you think at yourself ... as an expat, an Austrian, are you an immigrant....? How do you consider yourself?

AT1: Maybe Romanian, maybe not Romanian yet... But I was starting my first assignment in Belarus 25-26, I was one and a half year in Libya, I spent time travelling continuously, but even my staying in Austria was into international business [and travelling] ... So, I would rather say I'm a kind of International, Austrian-born, now living in Romania, but not being a Romanian yet.

I used to be in the USA, I lived in Germany, I lived in Belgium. I prefer to go something completely different. I lived in the USA also, is not what I am looking for, I'm looking for different experiences when I'm going out for me and my children. So, no I'm not looking for USA, Canada, and so on. I'm not looking for security, I'm looking for discovery. (FR3)

UK1: Well, I'm not Romanian 'cause I don't have an ID in Romania, a Romanian ID, I have a temporary ID, I've always had temporary ID... I don't see myself as an expatriate, you can't be an expatriate if you're long time in the country. An expatriate would normally be here for...

Interviewer: short period

UK1*: short period, I would say 5 years maximum, maximum 5 years. Probably less. So, I don't see myself as that either. I mean, we live here, we have a family, you know, with the family, we have business here, I mean I see myself as a foreign person living in a country... you know, with my family... ok, but because I've been here a long time, I'm... used to everything, I mean, in a way you could call it home, in a way. I could call it home. So, that's how I see myself, I don't, you know, see myself any other way.*

Yeah, they want to deal everything at first sight if I would be there, they want have a ... they won't be ruling to ... not to help me, but to is so kind I would say. It's like there's a distance, the language barrier is really there, but not in terms of ... they could understand, but in terms of... that just the way it is. We are here in Romania and we speak Romanian. (CZ1)

Stories of positive discrimination appeared in a couple of interviews: they are rooted in situations in which interviewees had to deal with the public health system. ES1 shared her positive impressions after visiting the public hospital when one of her children was injured. She was with her mother, who knew divergent recollections of Romanians working in Spain. They arrived at the explanation that they were foreigners, and so, they were better treated. In the case of ES1, positive discrimination was an ulterior explanation for contradictory experiences (hers and those of her mother's Romanian acquaintances), but for FR3 positive discrimination was something felt as it happened (*Box 2*).

Examples of positive discrimination in daily life

> *First, the people, are very nice, the doctors and nurses were very kind, they all tried to speak French and it was really nice, they were skilled, but the infrastructure was very poor, and terrible, and I remember we had to do something for my son and the doctor told me 'You look like you are wealthy, don't be offended, I can do that whith (what) I have here but if go to the pharmacy and buy this it will be better for your son, but I don't have this material'. And for me it was a bit shock. So for sure I said 'Give me this I will go to the pharmacy and buy it' but it was really surprising. And the second thing where I feel it was nice first, but made me uncomfortable, because we were foreigner and look wealthy, they made us pass in front of lot of poor people and gypsies that they were waiting, and that made me feel very uncomfortable as a person. I really had the feeling that they treated us...* (FR3)

Box 3

Changing plans while staying in Romania

> *When I came here the project was quite clear. When I came here in Romania, the project was like this: to stay two years in Romania, finish the project, and move to another country. This is what I liked very much, to travel all over the world. And then I arrived in this side of Europe and I realized I like, I love its history, I love culture, differences. I realized I have so much to learn here. After all these years I still don't know anything about these for real. The history of our culture was so simple compared with this. I used to think Portugal, our resources, discoveries, and then I arrived in this circle so many things up and is still to me so ... I remain remain remain remain, and all those dream about travelling around the world, living in Asia, living in South America ... kind of ... is not necessary priority anymore. I really like living this region and like I said, I like Romanians. So, if I need to go in Czeck Republic, in Prague that I like very much, very historical city, I love to go there time to time, say if I go in Vienna, if I go in ... everything is around here. So you don't make plans anymore to move around the world like I was thinking... I have two businesses here plus one collaboration in another, and I don't make plans to move, I feel I'm learning, I'm developing... If I feel that I continue to grow and learn and develop with the projects I have I will keep here* (PT1).

Homemaking takes various forms, completely disconnected as such, but having the particularity to re-interpret local customs in ways common to the home country. Sometimes this happens at the level of daily routine and values. PT1, despite being atheist, exposes his kids to both Catholicism and Orthodoxy (the religion of his wife), and insists on the importance of Catechism. AT1 and FR3 often receive visits from close family, such as kids or parents, who, through their continuous coming and going, become a constant part of their local universe, despite living in their countries of origin. DE1 transfers into the life of his international family the traditional German gendered division of household chores. For FR3, who thinks of himself as an explorer, unable to settle somewhere because the world is too big a place, enrolling his children in French language schools provides a sense of stability and is, in his words, the least he can do for his children. In the case of ES1, the extended family seems to be a major aspect. In her case, homemaking is realised through the constant relations to her parents in Spain: the packages they send and the fact that she and her nuclear family spend their holidays in Spain. She deems it important for children to spend time with their grandparents.

We noticed substantial changes for most interviewees in their life strategy compared to plans that they reported having when arriving in Romania (*Box 3*). The initial prioritisation of career reasons made way for either family or leisure, or at least gave them more space in the motivational mix. Migration became less fluid, and plans for leaving grow fuzzier than they initially seemed.

DISCUSSION

Our findings revealed several aspects pertaining to identity construction. Overall, they define a less common identity construction, leading to a global identity, but shaped by local positioning, and tailored to personal traits. HSIs to Bucharest are to a lesser extent 'migrants of privilege', but rather migrants within a privileged category.

An apparent **rejection of predefined categories** was found. In their discourses, the participants displayed a certain disregard for predefined categories when they referred to themselves. This can be interpreted as an indication of individual agency, or freedom of choice for themselves, visible especially when balanced with information from other research conducted with low-skilled migrants. The capacity of feeling more or less a Norse, while being a Portuguese living in Romania, is in itself a mark of this agency, projected inwards (who I am, how I feel about myself) but connected with behaviour patterns and attitudes towards the social environment (how I interact with other entities, based on my self-definitions). This is, in fact, a reinterpretation of structural elements with a somewhat constraining character (cultural prescriptions about identity – Portuguese, Romanian, etc.).

Fluidity of plans adds to the picture. For most interviewees, mobility was a strategy associated with career advancements. However, we encountered various instances in which the initial plans were redefined, following their experiences in Romania. Most commonly, this included finding a spouse and/or having children, but also observing ascending mobility and fast career development. The changes go beyond the typical change due to life course, and are also more intricate, compared to the usual fluidity of migration reported in the literature.

Places of/ in identity are localised both at the destination and the origin. Even though the respondents displayed cosmopolitan views, as citizens of a world full of possibilities, precise references to specific places appeared throughout the interviews. These references have a very local character, not a national one—Genoa, Prague, in general, the cities/ places of socialisation for the respondents. Such references could also be part of the homemaking strategies that we introduce in the following.

Creating a home is equivalent to creating a sense of stability. The most common dimension of homemaking is based on maintaining strong relationships with the extended family at the origin, through constant communication and visits. In this respect, children are very important, as the family relations are defined with them as reference – here, the importance of children having interactions with their

grandparents. Stability and children also converge when it comes to another mechanism of homemaking, this time based on children's education, through the preference for international languages and/or the parents' native language (with the comment that, when this aspect appeared, the native language was also an international one, namely French).

All four aspects stress the importance of personal identity and agency. Our interviewees are flexible in setting up a migration strategy and choosing their frameworks of reference in a highly personalised way that enables identity manifestations that escape usual categories.

Lack of predefined categories, opting for a fluid life strategy and not a predetermined one, and the permanent positioning in between places are breaking the traditionalistic pathways. They bring individuals into a state of relative uncertainty that they compensate through the homemaking strategies. The latter allows them to have a certain safety-net, bringing comfort and providing resources for agency. The whole process defines a fluid personalized identity, in which individual action is central, but nevertheless rooted in the perceived structural resources available.

Society also shapes part of identity. Knowledge about public healthcare provision is often mediated through the eyes of the relevant group of references, that is Romanians who are part of a sort of self-perceived elite (which is also a *de facto* elite). English is used as a communication tool in professional setups, irrespective of knowledge of Romanian language, in a way that was mentioned in other studies to mark a distinction from locals (Leinonen 2012). The interviewees referred several times to Romanians as experiencing a self-imposed sense of inferiority compared to foreigners. This led to positive discrimination towards the interviewees, even though the alleged inferiority of Romanians was not seen as justified by the interviewees. Our interviewees mentioned that they used to have predefined ideas about how Romanians were inferior or, at least, in an earlier stage of development, but also told how they came to change their views through direct interactions.

Our findings suggest that personal identity is more important than social identity in the case of HSIs and their identity construction at the destination, confirming our initial expectations. Individual and social facets of identity are redefined/ reconstructed in/ through relations, both with their peers, and with the rest of the Romanian society, the latter contributing to anchoring social identity in differentiation, and reinforcing social distinctions between natives and HSIs.

Such mobile professionals express a need for tailored policies devoted to the labour market and citizenship. However, as their needs are not rooted in survival, they could be easily overlooked by societies concerned mainly with classic social policy devoted mainly to those in need. If immigration policies are considered, in particular in a country that lacks human resources both in terms of its available labour force, and qualitatively – in terms of skills and qualifications, the picture is different. Our findings imply that when one intends to increase retention of such high-skilled immigrants, a proper setup should be conceived for bringing non-mediated information on the host society, and increasing interaction with all strata

of the local communities. In the absence of such policies, HSIs are most likely a rather untapped resource for the Romanian society.

LIMITATIONS

This analysis discusses some mechanisms and resources involved in identity construction in the case of HSIs, without the possibility of generalization or having generalization as a specific aim. During the fieldwork and consequently, in data analysis, there were some potential limitations, mainly associated with possible language barriers and the availability of research participants. While all the researchers in the team were fluent in English or French, as well as the research participants, the fact that interviews were conducted in a non-native language might have influenced the way questions and answers were formulated and understood, possibly impacting the quality of the data. Further potential cultural differences between researchers and respondents also need to be acknowledged. Another limit encountered during fieldwork was the reduced availability of possible respondents, due to their busy schedules. While this did not impede on reaching saturation, it contributed to limiting the sample size to 11.

It is also to be mentioned that the research took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and, as such, it does not take into account the mobility impositions and restrictions imposed by states during the pandemic. These probably had consequences for social and personal identity in the case of migrants in general, and HSIs in particular, which can constitute themes for other studies.

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*Abordând identitatea într-o manieră constructivistă (Weigert et al. 1986), o concepem ca fiind încorporată în interacțiunile sociale cu oamenii și colectivitățile și considerăm migrația internațională ca un vehicul de schimbare a unor astfel de contexte (Dinesen, 2013). Prin urmare, explorăm transformările identitare la migranții internaționali, concentrându-ne pe cazul imigranților UE cu înaltă calificare în București. Orașul se deosebește ca o enclavă bogată în cea mai săracă regiune din Uniunea Europeană. Imigranții noștri țintă pot fi atipici, dar au avantajul de a-și putea controla și influența mai bine propriul context (Favell, 2008). Documentăm un proces subtil de schimbare, cu referire la autodefiniții și evaluări ale alterității. Prin analiza interviurilor cu imigranți cu stoc înalt de educație (highly skilled immigrants – HSI) din București, discutăm despre locurile pe care le au agenția (*agency*) și structura socială în definițiile despre sine ale migranților. Susținem că elementele structurale sunt filtrate de experiențele directe ale acestor imigranți, în timp ce autodeterminarea și caracteristicile lor personale îi fac mai puțin expuși la constrângeri de orice fel. În același timp, susținem că interacțiunile la destinație contribuie la redefinirea așteptărilor și planurilor originale. Strategiile de* homemaking *acționează ca un substitut pentru menținerea identității modelate de cultura de origine.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *imigranți cu stoc înalt de educație; expați; identitate;* homemaking.