

London or New York? Mobility Options of Young Belgians in Times of Crises

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Since the beginning of the financial and economic crisis, Belgium has experienced a new influx of Southern European immigration while continuing to receive large numbers EU citizens proceeding from Central and Eastern European Member States. This reality is however hiding the fact that, simultaneously, a large number of Belgian citizens continue to leave the country every year. Belgian emigration has indeed tripled between 1970 and 2011 and nowadays about 35.000 citizens leave the country every year. Despite the increase in the number of Belgian pensioners retiring abroad, the modal age of departure remains low (26 years old).

In this paper, I propose to examine two related questions on the emigration of young Belgians. First, what are the motivations of young Belgians to leave their home country today even though Belgium seems to be resisting better than most Member States to the economic crisis? Second, what drives Belgian emigrants to specific cities abroad? **[comment: work in progress; second question to be addressed in the next version of the paper]**

To answer the two central questions of this paper, I will first proceed to a brief overview of the main socio-demographic characteristics of contemporary Belgian emigration. Then, I shall hypothesize that Belgian emigration is driven by two types of crises that are particularly prevalent in the country's history. First, Belgium suffers for several decades from recurring ethno-linguistic tensions between Flemings and Francophones. After the 2010 legislative elections, those tensions even peaked in a long period of political instability. The influence of this political context on migration decisions therefore needs to be discussed. To do so, I shall previously demonstrate how emigration has been instrumentalized in the ethno-linguistic conflict. Second, just like other Member States of the eurozone, Belgium has been strongly affected by the global financial and economic crisis. The region of Wallonia, however, had experienced high level of unemployment for several decades prior to the current crisis. In addition to discussion how the current crisis is affecting migration decisions, I will also show how these decisions also relate to a more profound distrust of young emigrants towards the Belgian socio-economic system.

In this paper, I focus on the presence of Young Belgians in the two global cities of London and New York. As demonstrated by the consular registry, the largest share of Belgian emigrants actually reside in the EU where they have the freedom to circulate as workers. Within the EU, these emigrants can also enjoy different benefits and use rights as EU citizens. In spite of these obvious advantages to move within in Europe, a share of Belgian emigrants still decide to leave the EU. This not only generally entails a further distance from the home country, it usually also complicates the legal process attached to emigrating as well as limits the rights and benefits of these emigrants compared to those who

moved within Europe. To understand how the choice between mobility options is made, we propose to compare the emigration decisions of Belgian emigrants in the global cities of London and New York. As with other small-sized Member States, Belgium lacks a global city that offers satisfactory career perspectives to highly-educated individuals. While Brussels offers a diversified service-centred economy in addition to hosting numerous EU institutions, it lacks strong specialized economic sectors such as finance, entertainment, fashion...For this reason, global cities in other Member States and beyond represent important magnets for young Belgian emigrants.

Overall, the empirical material used in this paper consists of a selection of interviewees under 40 year old in the panel of 69 semi-directed interviews made with Belgian emigrants in London and New York between 2009 and 2012. These interviews were initially conducted for a larger research project on contemporary Belgian emigration financed by the Belgian National Scientific Fund (FRS-FNRS).

1. A socio-demographic overview of contemporary Belgian emigration

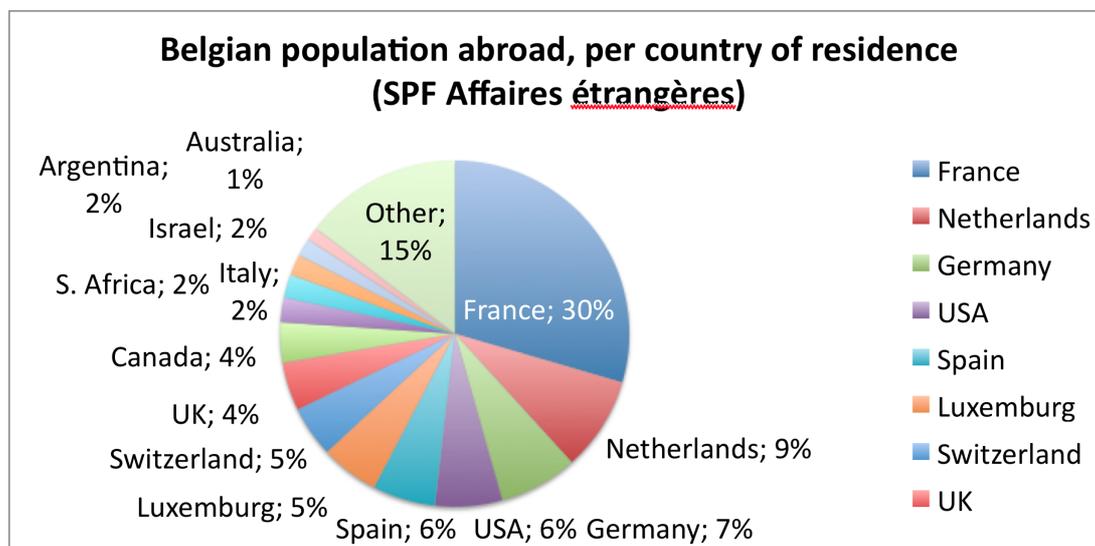
As underlined by Morelli (1998) in one of the few books that have touched upon this issue, emigration has been erased out of Belgian history. It appears that authorities do not find it relevant today to acknowledge the fact that, from the Belgian independence in 1830 until 1919, Belgium was facing more out-migration than in-migration. Nonetheless, the only official references to these old migration waves tend to glorify this past by referring to specific examples that are considered as "success stories" such as those of Walloons who migrated to Sweden or the Flemish who settled in South Africa. These examples obviously neglect the fact that the majority of Belgians who left the country during this period did so because they were forced to do so for socio-economic reasons (Petillon 1998). The fact that around 500,000 Belgians were living in France in 1890 (working mainly in the textile industry) when the country only counted 6,000,000 inhabitants at the time is quite telling in this regard (Stengers 1980). A similar malaise surrounds the history of the Belgian presence in the former colony of the Congo. Even though the Belgians had always considered Congo as a colony of exploitation rather than a colony of settlement, the authorities wanted white citizens to occupy key positions there. After a pro-active policy of the Belgian state to limit the influx of non-Belgian migrants into the colony, Belgian represented almost 80% of the 115,000 Whites living there on the eve of independence in 1960 (Foutry 1998).

Whether or not the lack of interest of Belgian authorities for the country's emigration is caused by its difficulty to deal with some darker chapters of its history, Belgium has long lacked the proper tools to collect data on its population abroad. Indeed, the statistics of the Belgian National Statistical Institute (INS) relying on municipal population registries have long suffered from the practice of many emigrants of not declaring to their municipality that they are leaving the country. Yet, this limited data inform us that around 10,000 Belgians have left the country yearly since World War II and this figure had almost doubled at the

turn of the 21st century. Out of these new Belgian emigrants, a small majority were men (54.2%) and the modal age to leave Belgium is 26 years old. To our particular interest, we observe large regional discrepancies in terms of migration decisions for the emigration rate reaches 11/1000 in Brussels (a bilingual region that is at least 70% francophone according to most conservative estimate), 5.7/1000 in Wallonia and 3.37/1000 in the most populated region that is Flanders. This data indicates that the Francophone population abroad has been growing faster than the Flemish one in the past years.

To determine where Belgian emigrants move, we can make use of the registries that each Belgian consulate is obliged to hold since 2002. While this registration facilitates administrative contacts and is itself a condition to register as a voter from abroad, the registration at the consulate is not an obligation for citizens abroad. As shown in Figure 1, about half of the over 300,000 Belgians registered abroad are living one of the six following destination countries: the four neighbouring countries (Netherlands, Luxemburg, Germany and France), Spain and the United States. In order to understand the significance of the Belgian presence in the neighbouring countries, we should also mention that a non-quantifiable number of Belgians commute to work in one of these countries every day.

Figure 1. Belgian emigrants' main countries of destination (2012)



2. Leaving Belgium in times of Crises

Because of the limited statistical tools available on the Belgian population abroad, it has been impossible so far to determine precisely its socio-economic profile and its motivations to leave the country. This lack of data has not prevented the development of a perception within Belgian society that the emigrant population is mainly made of high-skilled workers from the medium or high socio-economic classes of society and who have a more adventurous mind

that the average Belgian citizen. This image was built over the years and relies on a superficial analysis of the few data available. We identify three factors.

First, the colonial history of Belgium in the Congo has shaped the widely-spread image that only adventurous citizens proceeding from the higher socio-economic classes of society engage in emigration. As stated above, almost 100,000 Belgians were living in the Congo and most of them were forced to leave abruptly the country when it declared independence on 30 June 1960. During the colonial era, not all Belgians were however allowed to go work in the Congo. As part of the colonial ruler's strategy to instil a sentiment of superiority of the White men over the native population, the Belgian authorities only allowed educated Belgians able to pay a high "emigration fee" to move to the Congo (Rubbers 2009). In spite of this selection criteria, life in the Congo was a risky adventure for Belgians due to diseases and many kept a bitter-sweet sentiment about the experience after they came back abruptly from the former colony. This specific historical episode shaped the idea within Belgian society that emigration was reserved to citizens proceeding from the higher socio-economic classes with a risk-taker mentality.

Second, the political behaviour of citizens residing abroad has reinforced ideas about the socio-economic profile of emigrants. After the return of Belgian emigrants from the Congo, the Francophone Liberal Party has been the most proactive defender of emigrants' interest and supported over several decades the right to vote citizens residing abroad (i.e. external voting). As conceded during the interview with the leader of the international section of that party, the logic for supporting external voting was the wide-spread belief that Belgians abroad presented similar socio-economic characteristics to that of non-emigrant Liberal Party voters in Belgium. The external voting law was eventually approved in 2003 and the three subsequent elections have demonstrated that among emigrants who register as voters from abroad- there is indeed an over-representation of right-wing voters (see MR in table 1 and VLD in table 2)¹.

Table 1. Electoral results, Wallonia, Senate election, 2003, 2007 and 2010.

<i>Parti</i>	<i>Résidents + expatriés 2003</i>	<i>Expatriés 2003</i>	<i>Résidents + expatriés 2007</i>	<i>Expatriés 2007</i>	<i>Résidents + expatriés 2010</i>	<i>Expatriés 2010</i>
PS	35.60	20.35	27.90	20.69	37.35	19.86
MR	30.29	39.69	30.77	34.19	22.26	29.48
CDH	15.51	11.04	15.62	12.32	13.68	14.58
ECOLO	7.69	17.40	14.72	22.86	13.93	25.04
FN	6.04	2.79	6.49	2.72	No list	No list

Table 2. Electoral results, Flanders, Senate election, 2003, 2007 and 2010.

¹ These results should however been taken with great care for two reasons. First, only citizens registered with consulates can register as voters from abroad and many emigrants to do so. Besides, only about a third of the emigrants who have the right to register as voters from abroad do so. Second, the results presented below only concern the about 15% of emigrant voters who cast their vote in person or by proxy in consulates. The majority of voters abroad cast their vote by mail and these ballots are mixed to resident voters before being opened.

<i>Parti</i>	<i>Résidents + expatriés 2003</i>	<i>Expatriés 2003</i>	<i>Résidents + expatriés 2007</i>	<i>Expatriés 2007</i>	<i>Résidents + expatriés</i>	<i>Expatriés 2010</i>
SP.a	25.44	12.21	16.66	11.80	15.61	13.08
VLD	24.36	31.01	19.56	30.81	13.01	19.76
CD&V	20.54	20.18	31.58	23.11	16.19	14.69
Vlaams Blok	17.93	16.23	18.97	15.43	12.36	7.41
N-VA	4.85	4.39	Liste commune avec CD&V	Liste commune avec CD&V	31.49	26.02
AGALEV (Groen)	3.94	8.78	5.86	14.04	6.25	7.41

Source: SPF intérieur (2003, 2007, 2010)

Third, the absence of large-scale research project on Belgian emigration has meant that the majority of the literature produced on the topic comes from the Media. Different radio and TV shows in Flanders and Wallonia (such the show “les Belges du bout du Monde” -*Belgians from the other side of the world*- on the Francophone public radio) have focused on the experiences of Belgians living abroad. Similarly, magazines produced by emigrant associations (such as “Vlaming in de Wereld” -*Flemings in the World*- edited by the association bearing the same name) tend to cast light on individual experiences of leaving the country and residing abroad. The consequence of the literature is to stress the individual dimension on Belgian emigrants while neglecting potential structural factors that increase chances of departure among certain sectors of Belgian society. They also tend to focus on citizens moving to remote and uncommon destinations whereas the vast majority of citizens living abroad concentrate in just a handful of countries located mostly in the immediate proximity of Belgium.

As stated earlier, my objective with the article is to go beyond the individual factors explaining contemporary mobility of Belgian citizens. In particular, we want to focus on crises as triggers to emigration. Over the past years Belgium has suffered from a combination of both the global economic crisis and a political crisis related to ethno-linguistic tensions that have opposed Francophones and Flemings for several decades.

2.1 Emigration and the political crisis

For several decades, Belgian politics are largely determined by the ethno-linguistic conflict that oppose Flemish and French-speakers, the two largest communities composing the country's population. The conflict has experienced various peaks in the late 1960's, or more recently in 2010 when the country was left without a government for 541 days. In spite of these tensions, the ethno-linguistic conflict was never envisaged seriously as a push factor explaining Belgian emigration. The relative socio-economic stability of the country and the absence of violent episode in the history of the conflict probably explain this lack of interest in looking for connections between political tensions and emigration in Belgium.

Looking at the history of Belgian emigrant associations, we can however see that the diaspora has become a politicized object in Belgium. Historically, Belgian migrants' associations were quite common in countries like France, Canada, the United States and the former Belgian Congo. These associations were usually concerned with maintaining their Belgian identity abroad and with questions of integration into the host country. They were organized on a local or national basis in the country of residence and, until the 1960s, they had little transnational connections and no strong presence in the home country.

The creation of *België in de Wereld* (BIW, or Belgium in the World) in 1963 marked a turning point in the representation of Belgian emigrants. The roots of this association lay in the former Belgian Congo, Flemish migrants created two magazines in Flemish to respond to the absence of publication in that language in the colony. These magazines, run by Flemish intellectuals started a dynamic of affirmation of the Flemish identity abroad. The political implications of those magazines were important considering that key positions in the colony, and more generally, most positions of power in Belgium were occupied by French speakers. Since the 19th century, Belgium had indeed been a country ruled administratively, economically and politically in French with little consideration for the Flemish culture. French speakers in the Congo accordingly did not see the creation of these magazines with a positive eye.

With the independence of the Congo in 1960 and the subsequent repatriation of thousands of Belgians, several founders of the two magazines decided to provide social and psychological support to the returnees. They subsequently set up their office in Brussels and expanded their goals to *"the promotion of the social and cultural interests of the Flemings spread all over the world and more precisely of those Flemings who have migrated abroad or who have returned to the home country, and on the other hand, helping to promote the Dutch culture in a broad sense"* (translation mine, quoted in Goovaerts 1988: 8). After promoting the new associations extensively in different part of the world, they created the association *België in de Wereld* (Belgium in the World) in 1963 because, as reported by its founder, they resented the control of the state by French-speakers and accused them of being the cause of Flemish emigration:

"We [the Flemings in Belgium] had no motherland and the Flemings abroad had no motherland. (...). They have migrated out of misery and Belgium has done nothing for them" (Interview with Arthur Verthé, 1 December 2006).

In the 1960s the Flemish emancipation movement in Belgium had indeed grown stronger and, in this respect, the aspiration of some Flemings emigrants (and former emigrants) to promote their Flemish instead of a Belgian identity abroad was following the demands of Flemish leaders in Belgium.

While BIW was originally open to all Belgian citizens, its strong emphasis on the Flemish culture and the attacks of the French-speaking press made it difficult for BIW to claim it could help all Belgians abroad. Therefore, the BIW leaders saw a solution in asking the French speakers to set up their own association. This

assessment was clearly expressed by the president of the association who considered that as a Flemish cultural association it was “impossible for us to satisfy the cultural and psychological needs of the Walloon emigrants” (Ambassadeur 1968).

After World War II, political tensions between the two communities continued to increase. The domestic political debate on the future of Belgium as a unitary state intensified with the expulsion of Francophones from the Catholic University of Leuven in 1968 and the creation in 1970 of Linguistic communities whose authorities were granted prerogatives to conduct the cultural and education policies in place of the national government. With the conflict at home and the institutional transformation of the State, BIW felt increasingly uncomfortable to keep helping all Belgians abroad. They thus invited French speakers to set up their own association —Union des Belges à l'étranger— in 1967. Despite, the proximity of some UBE members to associations promoting the French language in Belgium, the francophone associations was less preoccupied with cultural and identity than its Flemish counterpart. Yet, it insisted that it would only communicate with Belgian emigrants willing to speak French and the association aimed primarily at representing the Belgians residing abroad before the public opinion and the Belgian authorities, especially those of the French-speaking region (Les Belges à l'étranger 1970).

As demonstrated here, the ethno-linguistic conflict in the home country has defined the modalities of associations of Belgians residing abroad. Independently of the political views of emigrants before departure, joining one migrant association or the other somewhat forces them to take a stance on the ethno-linguistic conflict. What I'm most interested in however is to determine whether the conflict influences migration decisions. During fieldwork, interviewees frequently underscored two side effects of the conflicts that considered as one reason to leave the country. The first one is discrimination in the work place which several French-speaking interviewees noted as a reason to leave Belgium. Their perception was that in large Brussels-based corporations, being a francophone was a disadvantage and, no matter how hard they would try to speak Dutch in the work place, Flemish coworkers would always get a preferential treatment because most of the managers were also Flemish.

Benoît, a young self-employed Belgian residing in London, exemplifies most clearly this feeling shared by many young French-speakers who long neglected learning Dutch at school and found themselves with limited career options because of this gap as they enter the job market of bilingual Brussels:

“When I left business school, I found myself being interviewed by HR managers who were mostly Flemish and asked an incredibly high level of Dutch for the jobs I was applying for. In Brussels, I always found that it was useless to ask people to speak Dutch for jobs in relations with the international market but, on top of that, they had prejudices against francophones and only those of us who are perfectly bilingual could make it there. I was rapidly fed up with this situation (...) and I told my self I was done with Belgium, I will never make it here without speaking Dutch

and I have no motivation to learn it. I was through with Dutch, uninterested to learn it and thus I decided to leave” (Interview, 1/3/12, London).

For young francophone workers such as Benoît, independently of the fact that discrimination against Francophones is real or not, not getting the job that they want because they do not speak the right language generates frustration with Belgium and makes them feel as collateral victims of the ethno-linguistic conflict. In this context, emigration appeared as the only viable exit strategy.

The frustration with the ethno-linguistic conflict is however not exclusively shared among French-speaking expatriates. During fieldwork, young Flemish and Francophone workers alike recurrently expressed their disapproval at what they perceived as the large amount of time and energy spent by Belgian politicians trying to defend the interests of their own linguistic community at the expense of the general interest. While no interviewee underlined political factors as a direct cause for emigration, most of them referred to the persistent bickering between political parties of the two communities as revealing of a typical Belgian mentality that they wanted to escape. In other words, to these young Belgian emigrants, the political conflict creates a persisting climate of distrust that appears as a potential barrier to professional success in Belgium. Moving to big cosmopolitan cities such as London and New York is thus also a way of escaping those limitations. Having to deal on a daily basis with the super-diversity of these global cities, these emigrants are reinforced in their beliefs that the Belgian ethno-linguistic conflict is meaningless.

Eric, a young Walloon musician based in New York, felt rapidly after leaving school in Belgium that the rivalry between Flemings and Francophones was creating a negative climate to artistic production in Belgium:

“I really hate those issues with the three languages in Belgium and those shitty politics. They [politicians] behave like children. I do not want to deal with that shit (...). When you leave, you open up a lot. When you leave Belgium and you go live abroad, you need to talk to everybody, you have to work with everybody. You need to work with all nationalities, you need to speak every language and you need to get along with all religions. You cannot think like Belgian politicians if you want to make it here because they think in a very primitive manner. If you want to be successful here [in New York], you absolutely must not think like them otherwise you won't have a career” (Interview, 30/6/10).

Kristien, like Eric, experienced big frustration with Belgian authorities prior to departure and left the country with the impression that authorities were there to prevent her from achieving her professional goals. Kristien is a young Flemish graduate whose dream was to become a Belgian diplomat and felt that she was not treated fairly during the selection process:

“I felt betrayed by my own country (...). This was a turning point for me. I then told myself: “I will never ever ask anything again to the authorities. This is what I did. I felt so betrayed...” (Interview, 22/3/10, New York).

While the interviewees do not attribute their emigration directly to the political crisis in Belgium, they share the view that the state is dysfunctional and is a potential hurdle in their professional career. As the fieldwork was conducted during or shortly after over a year of crisis during the country did not have a government, respondents felt comforted in their choice to leave. Post-departure political crises therefore reinforced their views that they would not be doing better from a professional viewpoint if they had stayed.

2.2 Emigration and the economic crises

With the global financial and economic crises, the topic of intra-European mobility of young Europeans has re-emerged in the study of migration flows. Young workers from Southern Europe have received most attention in this respect due to the fact that their home countries were most affected by the crisis. Yet, all EU member states have had to deal with its consequences. At the beginning of the crisis, the finances of the Belgian state were severely hit by the default of several Belgian banks which triggered a long-wave of austerity measures. As of August 2013, it can be argued—with necessary caution—that Belgium has been among the member states of the eurozone that best recovered from the crisis as it is among the few states whose economy is growing again. Nonetheless, growth figure cannot hide the fact that the unemployment rate reached its highest level in a decade with 8.7% in 2013, and most importantly, reached 23% for the population of working age under 25 year old.

These national figures also hide important regional disparities when it comes to employment in Belgium as Flanders' unemployment is under 8% while Wallonia's is over 13%. In addition, contrarily to Flanders, the unemployment in French-speaking Wallonia has not gone under 10% since the 1970s. In other words, while it is interesting to examine the role of the current crisis on emigration decisions, the effect of the crisis are to be combined with a long-term structural crisis of the job market in Wallonia. In addition to the effects of the financial and economic crisis, young French-speaking Belgian have grown up in a region that has been unable to overcome the long-lasting crisis of heavy industries in Europe (e.g. steel) that were traditionally the biggest employers in the region.

Fatima, who left the Walloon city of Liège in the mid 1990's when she was 34 year old illustrates how even the previous generation of emigrants had felt that the industrial crisis (whose effect most severely hit the region in the 80s and 90s) changed her perspectives and somewhat made emigration a viable option:

“All my life in Liège was actually quite interesting. Especially in the 1980s when I first moved to Liège, it was a city that was very dynamic. And then it started to slow down in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There was less and less to do in Liège. And that what made me decide that I should start considering moving abroad” (Interview, 20/7/10).

Beyond the specific case of Wallonia, young Belgian emigrants in New York and London feel that their skills will be much more rewarded abroad than in Belgium. It is no accident that virtually all my interviewees have done at least 3 years of studies after high school and many occupy positions in industries that are much more developed and/or lucrative in London and New York than in Brussels. As underscored by Stéphane, a young francophone working for a company specialized in financial information, there are a number of highly specialized sectors of the global economy in which Belgium fails to be competitive. Young Belgians who want to make a career in these sectors therefore feel their only option is to work abroad:

"JML: Do you also go back to Belgium for professional reasons?"

Stéphane: There is nothing in Belgium. Economic activity is dead there. People are equally creative as the steel industry (laughs)...It is a little bit of a disaster what is happening in Belgium. It is no longer a place that counts at the international level" (Interview, 17/2/10, New York).

Being in London or New York, Belgian emigrants have a sense that they are the center of their respective industry and that, independently of their desire to stay there, move to another country or come back to Belgium in a few years, this experience in any of these two global cities will serve their career much better than staying in Belgium. This is exactly the feeling that Thierry, a young financial analyst that moved from a large Belgian company to the City in London, experienced upon taking the decision to move:

"For the kind of job that I was doing [in Belgium], I knew that "the place to be", the place where the "real jobs" are to be found, the place where the action really happened was London. For me it was thus normal to come here because I was bored with my job and felt like I was not where the action was happening. Even though the crisis was already there, I knew there were still possibilities [to move to the City]" (Interview, 21/2/2012, London).

This sentiment of being in the place that matters for their respective job is shared overwhelmingly by young Belgian emigrants who were attracted by these professional sectors where London and New York thrive: banking and finance, creative industries (fashion, design, music, advertising...), information technologies, law and scientific research. Much has been said about global cities and their ability to attract both high and low skilled workers from the entire planet. Macro theories of migration have indeed underlined the organization of the global economy in a handful of urban centers where professional services and infrastructures are concentrated (Sassen 1991). Those global cities attract an increasing number of emigrants because of their positions as communications hubs. While Brussels has come to be recognized as another of these global cities and has certainly managed to become a global political hub, it does not offer similar opportunities (both in terms of careers and salaries) in the above-mentioned professional sectors than London and New York.

As said earlier, most young Belgians arrive in London and New York with high-level of qualifications. Yet, not all of them manage to find jobs that match these

qualifications because not all of them have succeeded in building enough relevant professional experience in Belgium before departure. This is the case of young emigrants such as Michelle who moved to London, not to find a more prestigious and lucrative positions in public relations, but to escape Belgium's employment market. Unemployment in Belgium –as in the whole EU- affects particularly young people. In Brussels, where Michelle comes from, youth unemployment reaches 27%. Yet, what triggered her departure, was not the lack of jobs but the impossibility to find an employer that would give her a long-term contract. Her first two jobs with a big electric company and a prestigious American bank ended up with her short-term contracts not being renewed:

"I told myself: I have studied enough...I want stability in my job and Brussels was not giving it to me. So I looked and decided that I would try...that I would give it a chance elsewhere" (Interview, 9/04/13).

What Michelle experienced in Brussels is what many other young Belgian graduates go through after leaving school: as employers receive temporary tax credits to hire young unemployed graduates, they tend not to renew their contract when tax credits stop and, instead, replace them with another unemployed graduate. This system put in place in Belgium to address youth unemployment has been criticized for its inability to provide young workers with long-term perspectives which is what Michelle was looking for as she left to London. But what made Michelle's migration to London easier was actually another device developed by the State to address youth unemployment. In a somewhat ironic fashion, Belgium's employment policy include both tax incentives for employers hiring young people and benefit incentives to young unemployed workers willing to go look for jobs abroad:

"When I arrived here, I came through the [Belgian] unemployment office (...) that gives the opportunity to people who are unemployed to look for jobs in another country for a while. If it does not work, you can come back but if it works, then you continue. I think that they gave me three months [to come look for a job in London] when I was unemployed" (Interview, 9/04/13).

Unlike the young professionals leaving jobs in Belgium to pursue more prestigious and lucrative careers in highly-specialized industries in global cities, young Belgians leaving out of exasperation for its unstable job market are not necessarily well-rewarded upon arrival. Indeed, in addition to prestigious specialized jobs, global cities also offer plenty of not so well considered service jobs. After occupying office jobs in well-know companies in Belgium, Michelle was working long hours for a betting shop in a deprived suburb of London. Similarly, Fatima —whose story was introduced above— found herself working as a waitress in New York after working as a designer in Belgium for several years. These young Belgians would have probably considered themselves over-qualified for these service jobs when they were living in Belgium. Yet, in spite of the difficult working conditions, these emigrants are not bitter about their current professional status abroad. Contrarily to the young professionals, they did not move for immediate professional rewards but rather wanted to break away from the Belgian socio-economic context that they felt offered them no

perspective. This sentiment —which they did not feel in Belgium— that they will be able to move up professionally overtime suffices to make them judge their emigration experience as satisfactory.

3. London or New York? Opting for intra or extra-European emigration

[Work in progress]

4. Preliminary conclusions

In this paper, I have demonstrated that, in spite of its numerical importance, Belgian emigration is a topic that is greatly under-researched. Because of this lack of academic interest, a series of clichés have developed on the profile of emigrants and their motivations to leave the country. I have also noted that the experience of Belgians moving to the Congo during the colonial period have not only shaped the image of the emigrant in Belgium, it has also marked the beginning of the organization of Belgian communities abroad along ethno-linguistic lines. Indeed, the creation of emigrant associations is strongly related to the rise of the Flemish movement for cultural autonomy after World War II. In this sense, it can be argued that emigrant associations have contributed to import the home country's conflict in Belgian communities abroad.

Looking precisely at the drivers of contemporary Belgian emigration, I have hypothesized that it is guided by two types of crises. First, I looked at political crises between Flemings and Francophones that occurred in Belgium since World War II and peaked in 2010 with the impossibility to form a government for over a year. Second, I looked at contemporary financial and economic crisis and, in the case of young workers proceeding from Wallonia, the industrial crisis as triggers to Belgian emigration. As demonstrated, both the political and economic crises in Belgium have not reached a sufficient level of intensity to explain a direct correlation between crises and emigration decisions. In both cases, I hypothesized that these crises shake the confidence of young Belgian citizens in their ability to be professionally successful in Belgium. It is this absence of long-term perspective in Belgium that explains the emigration of young Belgians to New York and London.

With regards to the political crises, no Belgian emigrant leaves for political reasons because its ethnicity or political opinion puts him or her in danger. Yet, I demonstrated some emigrants felt that being a francophone with limited knowledge in Dutch would always be held against them at the professional level. This limitation, which they interpret as a discrimination, made them aware of possible hurdles in the development of their career and therefore rendered emigration as an attractive option. More generally, young emigrants —Flemish and Francophones alike— also consider the political crisis as a sign of dysfunction of the Belgian state which positively reinforce their decision to emigrate afterwards.

With regards to economic crises, I noted that it was imperative to introduce a regional dimension when analysing the influence of these crises on emigration

decision. Young French-speaking emigrants have grown up in socio-economic context characterized by high-unemployment and the long-lasting crisis of the Walloon heavy industries. As they never saw their own region going through a period of sustainable growth and high employment, they are highly sceptical of their ability to pursue successful professional careers in Belgium. In spite of these regional differences, the contemporary financial and economic crisis has affected Belgium as a whole and has reinforced the perception of young workers considering to emigrate that they could be more successful elsewhere. Yet, in the case of New York and London, I was surprised to discover two characteristics of the young Belgian emigrants: none had left Belgium after an extensive period of unemployment and the vast majority of them had high level of education (at least 3 years of studies after high school).

In the two global cities I worked in, two profiles of Belgian emigrants rapidly emerged. First, there were young professionals moving precisely to these two cities because they are important hubs for the professional sector in which they work. Moving there not only give them access to more prestigious and lucrative jobs, it is also an investment in their professional career that they believe will pay off whether they stay there, move to another city or come back to Belgium. Second, there were young workers who left Belgium with a clearer dissatisfaction with its job market. In spite of their ability to find jobs in Belgium, the lack of long-term perspective and the precariousness of the jobs makes them consider emigration. For this second kind of emigrants, emigration is not necessarily immediately rewarding at professional but they are willing to accept precarious jobs in exchange for being in a city that they believe will allow to climb the socio-economic ladder overtime. In this sense, the experience of Belgian emigrants in New York and London coincides with previous research findings on global cities: these cities act as magnets for international migrants both in the highly-specialized and lucrative industries and the low-paid and low-skill service industries.

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