"I know I belong to a kind of migration that is perceived [to be] less problematic, but still, I am [a migrant]!" Migrant Self-Identification and Empathy amongst Privileged Migrants in Brussels

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While the mediatization and the politization of the management of the European Union's *physical* borders has been exacerbated by the refugee reception crisis of 2015-2016 (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, & Wodak, 2018; Rea et al., 2019), the expansion of *'symbolic'* borders – which materialize through exclusionary attitudes towards migrants – deserves further attention, considering their crucial implications on social cohesion. This communication is based on a PhD thesis which more largely investigates the perceptions of (privileged) migrants from Italy, Greece, and Turkey living in Brussels vis-à-vis migrants and immigration in their country of origin. Amongst other things, this thesis seeks to highlight migrant categorization processes as powerful *othering* tools, which hierarchize migrants based on their perceived (un)deservingness and (un)desirability, along nationality, class, age, gender, race, ethnicity, and religious lines, amongst others. Such "categorical fetichism" (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018) or "politics of naming" (Sigona, 2018) may for instance oppose 'expatriates' to 'migrants' (Kunz, 2020; Croucher, 2012), 'highly-skilled' to 'low-skilled' migrants (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2021), or 'refugees' to 'economic migrants'.

This PhD study draws from the interrelated theories of social identity, intergroup contact, group conflict and integrated threat, which posit that the quantity and quality of contact between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' will reduce prejudice against the outgroup, and that intergroup conflict can stem from realistic and symbolic threats – linked to economic competition, insecurity and/or loss of cultural or religious identity (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Blumer, 1958; Van Hootegem & Meuleman, 2019; Licata, Sanchez-Mazas & Green, 2009). This thesis also relies on the concept of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007) to understand our respondents' positionality and experience in a city as multicultural and diverse as Brussels. Our particular focus on the under-researched yet increasingly dynamic field of 'privileged mobilities' (Croucher, 2012) enables us to better grasp the power dynamics and inequalities that underlie migration processes and experiences.

As noted by Triandafyllidou: "*Neither the Mediterranean tradition of hospitality, nor the previous experience of Greeks and Italians themselves as immigrants, have prevented the rise of xenophobic attitudes and behaviour*" (2000: 187). In this paper, however, we investigate the extent to which our Italian and Greek respondents identify as migrants or not, and how the self-identification process of privileged migrants produces *empathy and solidarity* with socio-economically disadvantaged migrants, rather than *othering and exclusion*. We understand empathy as the ability to take someone else's perspective in order to understand and sympathize with their situation.

Methods

This communication is based on an ongoing PhD thesis conducted in the framework of the Horizon 2020 project MAGYC on migration governance and asylum crises. Using a qualitative and comparative approach, this thesis documents the lived experiences of (privileged) migrants from Italy, Greece and Turkey who are currently residing in Brussels, and studies the ways in which they perceive migrants and the migration situation in their country of origin. Indeed, in addition to being important countries of

emigration (including to Belgium), Italy, Greece and Turkey have gone through a 'migration turnaround' and have since become key countries of *immigration* (King, 2000).

This communication draws from 32 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between November 2020 and July 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Sampling criteria for respondents included residing in the Brussels-Capital region; being an Italian, Greek or Turkish citizen; and being affiliated to an Italian, Greek or Turkish organisation or network active in the field of public, commercial or cultural diplomacy. Most interviews took place online and were conducted in English or in French. They were then transcribed *ad verbatim*, coded manually using inductive coding (allowing themes to emerge directly from the data) and analyzed systematically using a master data analysis spreadsheet.

As the data collection is still ongoing, this paper focuses on the Italian and Greek samples, who were the largest groups at the time of writing. Table 1 below provides an overview of the sample considered, broken down per nationality, gender, age group and length of stay in Belgium (See also Annex 1).

Nationality		Gender		Age group			Length of stay		
		Male	Female	18-35	36-49	50+	-5 yrs	6-9 yrs	10+ yrs
Italians	**19**	**11**	8	**9**	6	4	**10**	2	7
Greeks	13	**10**	3	3	1	**9**	5	0	**8**
Total	32	21	11	12	7	13	15	2	15

Table 1. Sample overview (July 2021)

The complexity of migrant self-identification

In order to better understand our respondents' position with regards to migration, the first step of this research consisted in probing their reflexivity regarding their own migrant identity (or lack thereof). Indeed, privileged migrants often do not consider themselves as such (Kunz, 2020; Le Bigot, 2021). Not being aware (or not being constantly reminded) of one's migrant status constitutes a privilege in itself, as it reflects an unhindered migration experience. Respondents were therefore asked whether they identified as migrants.

The first reason brought forward by our respondents to justify why they did not fully identify as migrants was that they identified first and foremost as Europeans. [See Luca, 30; Pietro, 27; Silvio, 52; Alexandros, 62; Gerasimos, 68; Ioannis, 25; Nikos, 29; Theodoros, 64].[1] As explained by Luca (30, Italian): "(...) *in perceiving the EU with no borders, you don't perceive yourself as a true migrant*". As such, these respondents tended to feel more like *internal* migrants:

> (...) I think that since I feel European, I know that I'm a migrant, but somehow, I'm a migrant within Europe. It's not the same for me. It's a lower form of migration to some extent, you see. It's just like a person from Texas going to work in New York or in Washington, D.C - it's not really the same, but it's getting closer to that, in my opinion. (Pietro, 27, Italian)

The second recurrent argument consisted in explaining that living in a city as diverse and international as Brussels made it easy to 'blend in' [See Emanuele, 41; Flavio, 60; Giulia, 24; Antonis, 41; Markos, 61]. Somehow, respondents felt that this super-diverse context diluted their specific identities. For instance, Emanuele (41, Italian) explained that he rather felt like "*a foreigner amongst foreigners*". Many respondents felt that this had not been the case in other European countries they had lived in – such as France or Germany – where the host country's national identity was more clearly defined and apparent:

[1] All respondents' names have been pseudonymized for confidentiality purposes.

> In Belgium, the feeling that the environment reminds you that you are a stranger exists, but it's not that strong. (...) Because it's very international in Brussels, they are used to it. In Germany, in the city where I was it was not so international, so... the environment wouldn't let you forget that you are a foreigner. (Markos, 61, Greek)

Another important reason for not identifying as a migrant – given exclusively amongst the Greek sample – consisted in feeling to have successfully "integrated" [See Angeliki, 31; Antonis, 41; Eirini, 61; Markos, 61; Theodoros, 64; Stefanos, 69]. This argument was predominantly used by respondents who had been in Brussels for over a decade and thus felt a strong sense of attachment and belonging to the city:

> Certainly not, certainly not. I feel like a Belgian 100%. I'm not feeling like a migrant in Brussels, not at all, huh! I feel that I have rights there, I feel that I've worked there, that I've contributed, you know... so I feel thankful for many issues, because I've lived my whole life in Brussels after all... (Stefanos, 69, Greek)

In a similar logic, Francesca (32, Italian) identified as a migrant precisely because she did not speak French and did not feel fully integrated for this reason.

Agency in the migration decision constituted another relevant element for our respondents. In some cases, they did not feel like migrants because they had not moved "*out of necessity*" (Antonis, 41; Raffaele, 42) but rather as way to follow an opportunity at a given time in their lives. In most cases however, respondents identified as migrants precisely because they had chosen to improve their own or their family's lives and/or economic conditions [See Adriana, 39; Carla, 32; Gianna, 49; Marco, 43; Raffaele, 42; Ricardo, 33; Iraklis, 60; Markos, 61]. For instance, Carla (32, Italian), who had moved to Brussels in 2011, explained that her decision to move (and that of many Italian youth at the time) had been strongly influenced by the economic crisis of 2010 and the lack of career prospects at the time. Gianna (49, Italian) also acknowledged that this had however been a risky choice:

> I mean, I had work there [in Italy], I had my house... [Coming to Brussels] it was just sort of realizing a dream, giving a new opportunity to my family... but risking a bit. So moving there, leaving my parents 1,200 kilometers away, all my friends... so I feel immigrant in that way.

In the process of identifying as 'economic' or 'work' migrants, respondents often acknowledged that their move had been a privileged one, spontaneously identifying as "lucky" (Raffaele, 42) "luxury" (Adriana, 39; Emanuele, 42) or "privileged" (Eirini, 55) migrants. Such privilege was perceived to amount to symbolic advantages (e.g. European citizenship and freedom of movement, cultural capital, social status, whiteness) and material advantages (income level). Our respondents' agency over their decision to migrate to (and remain) in Brussels – but also having had such a smooth, unhindered migration trajectory and experience – brings another dimension of privilege to our respondents' experience in Brussels.

Positionality vis-à-vis past and current Italian and Greek immigrants

Having highlighted some of the ways in which respondents identified (or not) as migrants, we now analyze how they position themselves as Italian and Greek migrants specifically, as two historically significant immigrant populations (King, 2000; Lafleur & Stanek, 2017; IBSA, 2021).

Examples of past waves of Italian and Greek immigrants were often used to stress the similarities across migration experiences, and oftentimes to call for more solidarity with today's socio-economically disadvantaged migrants [See Carla, 32; Stella, 26; Ricardo, 33; Alexandros, 62; Angeliki, 31, Eirini, 55; Ioannis, 25; Stefanos 69]. Some respondents for instance highlighted that previous Italian and Greek migrants had themselves been marginalized or discriminated against. For example, Carla (32, Italian) stressed that during the early years of Italian immigration in Belgium, some cafes had signs to restrict

access "*to Italians and dogs*" and that many first-generation Italian migrants in the 1950s would not teach their children Italian in order to facilitate their integration. In addition to labour migration, Greek respondents also stressed the many instances in the 20th century where Greeks had been displaced due to conflict. These examples led our respondents to express their sympathy with the discriminations currently faced by migrants. As stressed by Ricardo (33, Italian): "*we are absolutely a population of migrants (...) but sometimes, of course, we forget it, and we blame the others that come, you know, that are trying to do the same but coming to Italy*". Similarly, Carla (32, Italian) and Angeliki (31, Greek) denounced the double-standards that led some of their co-nationals to see themselves as more deserving to be in Belgium than other migrants:

> (...) People say: *"[Migrants] shouldn't come, they should stay where they came from!"*, and I tell them: *"Well okay, but there are bombs there!"* So, it's easy to say... And, often, when it is Greek people who say that [in Belgium], I tell them: *"But you are here. And we are here. For a better life"*. And they say: *"Yes, but we contribute to the economy*", et cetera. And I say: *"Yes, but that's all they ask for!"* To come here and contribute to the social fabric as we say. But we don't give them the chance to. It's complicated. (Angeliki, 31, Greek)[2]

Several respondents – included those who had not previously identified as migrants – also alluded to the history of migration within their own families [See Stella, 26; Raffaele, 42; Alexandros, 62; Anastasia, 55; Ioannis, 25; Stefanos, 69]. For instance, Ioannis' (25, Greek) grandparents were refugees who had fled Smyrna (now known as the Turkish city of Izmir) following the Greco-Turkish war of 1919-1922, while Stella's (26, Italian) grandmothers had emigrated to Italy from Slovenia. Raffaele (42, Italian), a proud Torinese, explained that his parents were immigrants from the South of Italy. Anastasia (55, Greek) evoked her great-grandparents' journey all the way from Azerbaijan:

> I knew, from all the stories, that they were not received with open arms. My great-grandfather used to say: "*When we were there [in Azerbaijan], they called us Greeks. When we arrived in Greece, we are the Turks, we are the Russians, we are the Cossacks, we are I don't know what... but we are not Greeks, sadly*!"

Eirini (53, Greek) felt that current Greek migrants who were working in the EU institutions – like her – were not "*the genuine migrants*", as they had had much easier working and living conditions than those who had arrived in the post-war period. In spite of their differences, she acknowledged spending a lot of time with second and third generation Greeks:

> But you see that these people [second and third generation Greeks] have had different experiences than what I have had, or other colleagues in the European Union. (...) It's a different world. It shouldn't be. This is why me and my husband, we have quite a lot of social contacts with those people (...). We just have other experiences, and maybe there were other reasons that brought us to Belgium, but after all, we're all Greeks! (Eirini, 53, Greek)

Migrant self-identification, reflexivity and empathy

We have shown to which extent privileged Italian and Greek migrants in Brussels identified (or not) as migrants, as well as some of the ways in which they stressed (dis)similarities with previous waves of Italian and Greek immigrants. We now delve deeper into the more concrete effects of respondents' self-identification as (privileged) migrants.

For one, identifying as a migrant can contribute to normalizing migration (rather than stressing its exceptionality) and highlighting the universality of migrants' aspirations and human rights. In such

[2] Quote translated from French by the author

cases, our respondents' self-identification as "economic migrants" – a term which carries important pejorative connotations in public debates around migration (Crawley & Skleparis 2018) – could be interpreted as a way to normalize discourses around economic migration (and other forms of so-called 'voluntary' migration) and to stress their solidarity with people on the move, regardless of their national origin:

> Yes. [I identify] as an economic migrant, to some extent yes, even though I work in an international organisation and we have a special regime in Belgium. Still, I think that, you know, at the end of the day, we are economic migrants, so working in another European country. That's why I sympathize with some migration issues generally" (Iraklis, 60, Greek)

In some cases, our respondents had been made aware – through their own migration experience – of some of the challenges or injustices faced by international migrants, which led them to empathize with their plight. For instance, many respondents stressed the difficulties of having to leave your loved ones behind and to adapt to an unfamiliar environment [See Adriana, 39; Emanuele 42; Francesca, 32; Gianna 49; Raffaele, 41]. Similarly, Anastasia (55, Greek) indicated that living abroad could sometimes create feelings of "isolation" and "in-betweenness": "*when you go back for example, you are always the foreigner suddenly (...) And here [in Belgium] also, you're always the foreigner*."

Importantly, respondents often acknowledged their privilege and admitted that their nationality, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and/or geographical proximity with their home country mitigated such difficulties to integrate [See Andrea, 31; Carla, 32; Emanuele, 42; Francesca, 32; Pietro, 27; Raffaele, 41; Eirini, 53]. For instance, Raffaele (41, Italian), who self-identified as a "*lucky migrant*", was aware that being "*on the lucky side of the planet and of society*" had made his migration experience much easier. The following quote by Andrea (31, Italian) demonstrates that reflexivity around one's own privileged position can produce empathy:

> So yes, I feel like I migrated. At the same time, it would be superficial, it would just be not true to say that all migrations are the same. So I know I belong to a kind of migration that is perceived [to be] less problematic, but still, I am [a migrant]. And so, you know, the fact of feeling that I'm a migrant as another person, it's just more (...) to highlight the fact that we are all moving, right? For some reason or another. And (...) I can't tell you how many times colleagues or others have said, you know: "*This area of Brussels is full of migrants!*" (...). We are migrants as well. So sometimes it's nice to remind them that. (...) So yes, I feel like a migrant. But I'm sensitive too, of course, of the opinion or the life experience of somebody who has had to go through something that is unspeakable (...) So (...) anyway, I recognize my privilege.

Angeliki (31, Greek), who had moved to Belgium as a young child with her parents and did not identify as a migrant but as a "*Greek who comes from Belgium*", was made aware of her own privilege as she could pass for Belgian and as such had never been subjected to xenophobia. Recalling an incident from her teenage years when her father was told to "*go back to his country*" by a Belgian motorist, she explains how this incident made her reflect upon her own advantages:

> I had never heard this before. Because, well, [Belgium] is my country, you see? And then I told myself: *"Oh yeah, for them, we don't speak French, we are not Belgian, we are from God knows where!"* [She laughs]. And for a few seconds, I realized what it was like for all these Muslim people – who are visibly foreign – Because for me it's fine, I can pass as Belgian, but a Muslim girl who wears the headscarf... I realized that people must probably tell her all the time that she's not Belgian. While I have the advantage that, if I walk in the street, nobody's going to say: *"Look at this one!"* And I also have the advantage of speaking French without an accent, other than a Belgian one! [She laughs]. But this is not the case for my parents...[3]

[3] Quote translated from French by the author

In some cases, recognizing their own positionality (and past or current struggles) as migrants, and more particularly the double-standards that exclude less socio-economically advantaged migrants, led respondents to recognize that they had a certain role in influencing mentalities back home and promoting more positive narratives around migration [See Adriana, 39; Flavio, 60; Francesca, 32; Gianna, 49; Pietro, 27; Stella, 26; Nikos, 29]. More specifically, they felt that having been migrants themselves, they had gained new insights and values from their experience:

> I think that living here you can experiment a more multiracial and multicultural life and society. (...) So coming back, you know, it's been an occasion to communicate to people living in Milan that it's possible to live in a town with people coming from abroad, from everywhere, without feeling... bad! (Flavio, 60, Italian)

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented the main explanations that were used by our respondents to justify whether they identified as (privileged) migrants or not. While few respondents either strongly identified as migrants or firmly rejected this label, most answers were far from straightforward and attest to the complexity and fluidity of migrant self-identification processes. Many respondents referred to previous waves of Italian and Greek immigrants to highlight the common experiences and challenges faced by migrants across time and space. They further stressed some of the challenges which made migration a 'universal' human experience, all the while demonstrating reflexivity regarding their own privileged situation. Perspective-taking and recognizing one's privilege can therefore produce empathy and lead to solidarity actions with less privileged migrants, which are further analyzed in our PhD thesis.

Importantly, our PhD research more generally demonstrates that such expressions and practices or solidarity are far from fixed and that, in many cases, both othering of and solidarity with migrants form part of a subtle continuum. As such, respondents who would at times appear in favor of migration could easily appear more hostile at another point in the conversation.[4] Therefore, although we have focused in this paper on the effects of migrant self-identification (or lack thereof) on empathy, our data also includes cases where respondents explicitly sought to distinguish themselves from migrants who were perceived as 'different' and less deserving. For instance, respondents stressed their differences with other Italians and Greeks currently living in more distant continents, questioning the ways in which some of them had acquired the Greek or Italian nationality despite having lost all contact with their homeland. This could be understood as a form of 'gate-keeping' and othering, as it brings discussions around who deserves to be included in the national "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) or not. In other cases, respondents strongly rejected the 'migrant' label and identified instead as 'expats', formulated essentializing remarks about certain marginalized migrant groups, or appeared in favor of immigration measures that sought to contain and deter migration on the EU's Southern borders.

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[4] See Hut, E. (Upcoming). Migrant Othering and Solidarity: Comparing the Perceptions of Privileged Migrants in Brussels (Manuscript in preparation), In: T. Bircan, *New (Other) Thoughts on Migration and Migrants*. London: Transnational Press London.

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Annex 1

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Arrival	Affiliation
Italians					
1	Carla	F	32	2011	National representation*
2	Marina	F	23	2020	National business organisation**
3	Luca	M	30	2016	Italian think tank
4	Lorenzo	M	63	1995	Italian business network
5	Silvio	M	52	1999	Think tank
6	Francesca	F	32	2017	National business organisation
7	Emanuele	M	42	2009	National financial institution
8	Andrea	M	31	2019	Regional government
9	Pietro	M	27	2018	National financial institution
10	Marco	M	43	2007	Italian business network
11	Ricardo	M	33	2013	National business organisation
12	Flavio	M	60	2020	Regional government
13	Luigi	M	44	2005	EU body
14	Cristiana	F	57	2015	Regional government
15	Gianna	F	49	2017	Regional government
16	Giulia	F	24	2019	Regional government
17	Raffaele	M	42	2017	Regional government
18	Adriana	F	39	2008	Italian business network
19	Stella	F	26	2020	Italian network
Greeks					
1	Ioannis	M	25	2019	EU agency
2	Antonis	M	41	2005	National business organisation
3	Alexandros	M	62	2018	National representation
4	Angeliki	F	31	1990	National representation
5	Panagiotis	M	60	2016	National representation
6	Anastasia	F	55	1988	Greek cultural institution
7	Theodoros	M	64	2015	Greek business network
8	Gerasimos	M	68	1995	Greek business network
9	Markos	M	61	2004	Greek business network
10	Stefanos	M	69	1983	EU agency (retired)
11	Iraklis	M	60	1987	EU agency
12	Eirini	F	53	1991	EU agency
13	Nikos	M	29	2017	Greek business network

*National representations = embassies, consulates, or permanent representations to the EU/NATO.
**National business organisations = business or trade federations/unions, chambers of commerce, etc.