Navigating Brussels' "bubble(s)". Privileged migrants' perceptions of (super)-diversity in the EU capital and its implications on migrant othering and solidarity

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*' boundaries – which materialize through exclusionary attitudes towards migrants – deserves further attention, considering their crucial implications on social cohesion.

According to intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew et al., 2011), the quantity and quality of contact between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' can reduce prejudice against the outgroup. Intergroup conflict can however stem from realistic and symbolic threats – linked to economic competition, insecurity and/or loss of cultural or religious identity (Blumer, 1958; Van Hootegem & Meuleman, 2019). The concept of *super-diversity*, which was coined by Steven Vertovec (2007) to describe the changing nature of recent immigration into Great Britain, stresses the diversification of "new" migration flows into traditional migration destinations and the complexification of their general effects on society. There is high potential in associating this concept with intergroup contact theory as they both carry important implications for social cohesion in multicultural and diverse societies. Besides, it can easily be applied to the context of Brussels, the highly cosmopolitan EU capital, where numerous opportunities for intergroup contact arise given the co-existence of a multitude of migration experiences.

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 both their host and home countries. Drawing from 51 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between November 2020 and March 2022, I more specifically analyze in this paper the **extent to which our respondents' experiences and perceptions of (super-) diversity lead to intergroup contact and further affect their ingroup/outgroup othering and solidarity discourses and practices.**

Shedding a light on how super-diversity is felt and experienced by those who contribute to it (namely "new" migrants) can help us appreciate how intercultural dialogue takes shape in practice and what this implies for social cohesion. After presenting my methodology, I briefly explain how the case of Brussels can help operationalize the concept of super-diversity. I then present my respondents' arguments in favor and against multiculturalism and (super-)diversity in Brussels, teasing out some of the ways in which these views affect their othering and solidarity discourses towards other migrant groups and minorities.

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.[1] 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, studying 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 become key countries of *immigration* (King, 2000). This communication draws from 51 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between November 2020 and March 2022, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Sampling criteria for respondents included residing in the Brussels-Capital region (or being strongly involved in its day-to-day life through commuting there for work for instance); 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 (through work or as a side activity).[2] Most interviews took place online and were conducted in English or in French. They were then transcribed *verbatim*, coded manually using inductive coding (allowing themes to emerge directly from the data) and analyzed via thematic analysis using both a master data analysis spreadsheet and the NVivo computer software.

The table below provides an overview of the sample considered, broken down per nationality, gender, age group and length of stay in Belgium.

Nationality		**Gender**		**Age group**				**Length of stay**			
		Male	Female	18-35	36-49	50+	N/A	-5 yrs	6-9 yrs	10+ yrs	N/A
Italians	**20**	11	9	10	6	4	0	9	3	7	1
Greeks	**18**	11	7	7	1	8	2	7	2	9	0
Turks	**13**	8	5	3	6	4	0	5	2	5	1
Total	*51*	*30*	*21*	*20*	*13*	*16*	*2*	*21*	*7*	*21*	*2*

Table 1. Sample overview (March 2022)

Brussels, an example of super-diversity?

Initially coined by social anthropologist Steven Vertovec, the concept of *super-diversity* can help us understand the context in which our (migrant) respondents experience and perceive migration and social diversity in a city as multicultural as Brussels. It defines "*the dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade*" (Vertovec, 2007:1). The notion of superdiversity does

[1] See www.themagycproject.com

[2] This includes, for instance, permanent representations to the EU/NATO, consulates and embassies, regional delegations, chambers of commerce, national trade associations, professional or social networks, cultural centers, etc.

not only center around increasing inflows of immigrants, but also describes a diversification in terms of their countries of origin, languages, religions, migration channels and immigration statuses, gender, spaces and places of settlement and concentration as well as transnational practices.

Super-diversity has often been used as a backdrop to studies about Brussels, a highly cosmopolitan city, where a multitude of diverse migration experiences have long co-existed (Vertovec, 2019; Crul, 2016; Favell, 2008). As of January 1st, 2020, Brussels' foreign population amounted to 35% of the total population of the city (432,697 foreign nationals out of a total population of 1,219,970) and represented a total of 185 nationalities. 65% of the total foreign population originated from EU countries, and the remaining 35% from non-EU countries. As of January 1st, 2020, Italians, Greeks and Turks respectively represented 8,1%, 2,2% and 2% of the total foreign population in the Brussels-Capital Region (IBSA, 2022).[3]

Image 1: This mural by the Belgian cartoonist Philippe Geluck, in the municipality of Etterbeek, features his famous character "Le Chat". It compares Brussels to a pizza "with European flavours" composed of different dishes from European countries or regions. © Elodie Hut

Importantly, Vertovec has cautioned against using super-diversity as a mere synonym of "more diversity" or "more ethnicity". Rather, the aim of the concept should be to uncover the "*new patterns of inequality and prejudice, including emergent forms of racism, new patterns of segregation, new experiences of space and "contact", new forms of cosmopolitanism and creolization (...)*" that are entailed by these combinations of migration patterns and statuses (Vertovec, 2019:126). **Indeed, and as I intend to show in this paper, Brussels' highly multinational and multicultural context does not necessarily lead to meaningful intergroup contact between migrant groups, and between migrants and natives.** On the contrary, it can also lead to the creation of close-knit national/cultural or class-based communities and result in othering discourses and practices towards perceived "outgroups".

[3] Note: These figures do not include foreign nationals who also hold the Belgian nationality.

A privileged migration experience

My particular focus on the under-researched yet increasingly dynamic field of 'privileged mobilities' (Croucher, 2012) seeks to help me uncover the power dynamics and inequalities that underlie migration processes and experiences. Given my theoretical and methodological focus on *privileged* migrants,[4] it is important to understand that **respondents' lived experiences and perceptions of migration and (super-)diversity are shaped by their advantageous position in Brussels' international ecosystem**. Although the reasons for identifying (or not) as a migrants differed considerably across our sample,[5] many of our respondents spontaneously identified as "*privileged*", "*lucky*" or "*luxury*" migrants, while others directly identified as "*expats*", "*white collar*" or "*highly skilled*" migrants. They generally perceived this privilege to amount to their European citizenship (and associated freedom of movement), to their skills, education and/or income level, or to their whiteness, amongst others:

> *Well, they call us "expats" but still, I think it's just a type of, you know, migration. I usually say also to my friends in Italy that I consider myself a "luxury migrant" because I just left the country because I wanted to, not because I needed to by all costs...* (Adriana, 39, Italian)[6]

Our respondents' **agency over their decision to migrate to (and remain) in Brussels** also brought an additional dimension of privilege to their experience. Indeed, for a great number of respondents, their choice to move to Brussels was a deliberate one, which matched their career plans and ambition to work in international or European affairs. Besides, their capacity to feel "*at home*" in a city as international as Brussels was further facilitated by their **previous international migration experiences** and the "**cosmopolitan capital"** (Brahic & Lallement 2018) they had acquired in the process. About 70% of our respondents (n=35) had lived abroad once or more before moving to Brussels, either for work or study purposes.[7] This cosmopolitan or international outlook also transpired in the way some of our respondents spontaneously identified as "*cosmopolitans*" (Anastasia, 55) or "*world citizens*" (Yusuf, 68; Alexandros, 69). In addition to more generally stressing their **sense of international identity**, many fully embraced their **Europeanness**, presenting themselves as "*dedicated*" Europeans who strongly believed in the "*European dream*" (Pietro, 27). This was also the case amongst Turkish respondents, such as Ayça (31), who strongly believed in Turkey's European character and EU accession process, stating: "*I want my country to be facing the EU, and nowhere else*".

[4] I conceptualize 'privileged migrants' as migrants possessing material (income) and/or symbolic capital (e.g. citizenship, socio-economic status, cultural capital) and who can, as such, be in a dominant and desirable position in most social contexts.

[5] See draft paper: "*Migrant self-identification and empathy amongst privileged migrants in Brussels*" (Working paper presented at the 2022 ISA Annual Conference)

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

[7] Their main destinations were the United Kingdom and France by far (n=16 and n=13 respectively), while other popular destinations included the United States, Germany and Turkey.

Pros of super-diversity

Shedding a light on how super-diversity is felt and experienced by those who contribute to it (namely "new" immigrants) can help us operationalize the concept and validate its relevance in the lived experiences of both migrants and non-migrants. When asked about the pros and cons of super-diversity in Brussels, the overwhelming majority of our respondents were eager to stress the advantages and exceptional character of the city, with statements such as: "*I don't live in Belgium: Brussels is not Belgium*" (Marco, 43) or "*I [feel] like a Brussels citizen but (...) a migrant to Belgium*" (Luca, 30).

First, many welcomed the fact that living in a city as international as Brussels gave them the **opportunity to be exposed to a variety of cultures and nationalities,** thus enabling them to widen their horizons. In doing so, they gave examples of their friends, colleagues, and roommates who came from "*all over the world*" and of how enriching and intellectually challenging and stimulating this was. For instance, Christos (53, Greek) welcomed the fact that his Belgium-born children were growing up with fewer prejudices than he had. For Iraklis (Greek), living in Brussels had been an opportunity to form close friendships with Eastern Europeans, whom he had limited interactions with prior to the 2004 EU enlargement.[8] Respondents also perceived multiculturalism to be strongly reflected in the capital's rich cultural offer when it came to arts, gastronomy, and languages. The following quote by Silvio (52, Italian) illustrates this general appreciation of diversity as a defining feature of Brussels:

> *I think that for somebody arriving in Brussels in his first weeks, months and years of experience, it's really a paradise. Because if you go abroad, generally it's because you are really driven by a desire of opening yourself to something new, and Brussels offers this novelty in a very unique way. Over the course of a typical day in Brussels, you can really go to cultures from every side of the world, from every geography, changing languages two, three, four times, back and forth in the same day, so this is really amazing.*

A second recuring argument in favor of super-diversity consisted in **feeling that Brussels' international character allowed foreigners to feel "*welcome*" and to form an integral part of the (international) community**. As explained by Luigi (44, Italian): "*the fact that [Brussels] is so diverse, if you are a foreigner or a stranger, it makes it easier for you to blend in because you are just one of the many colors that you find here*". Similarly, Adriana (39, Italian) felt that: *"Brussels [is] so diverse that you never feel out of place"*. Adding: *"Because nobody is home, they have to make it home"*. Tolga (28, Turkish) felt that as a foreigner in Brussels, "*your identity or whatever is even less visible... you know, you're just like everyone else there, your identity is just, like, speaking an additional language in a way*". In many cases, this positive experience contrasted with our respondents' reported experiences in other EU countries, such as France or Germany, where they had often been confronted to a less welcoming environment. Due to Brussels' special position as the capital of the EU, many respondents valued the fact that they were **located in the "*centre" or the "heart"* of Europe and formed an integral part of the diverse "*EU bubble*".** Some respondents further described Brussels

[8] In 2004, the EU witnessed its largest single enlargement, with the following ten countries joining the EU at once: Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Romania and Bulgaria later joined the EU in 2007, and Croatia in 2013.

as "*the melting pot of the whole of Europe*" (Iraklis) and "*the only city where you can really find a European culture*" (Pietro, 27), echoing Favell's remark that Brussels could easily claim to be "*the quintessential European city*" (Favell, 2008: xi)

This overall satisfaction with their lives in Brussels and their positive experience of super-diversity often led research participants to express a **strong sense of belonging** to and of **place attachment** in Brussels. This manifested in different ways, such as the feelings of being "home" in Brussels, mid-to-long term plans to settle in the city, having acquired the country's citizenship, owning property, participating in local politics, having started a relationship and/or a family in Belgium.

Cons of super-diversity

In addition to praising the advantages of Brussels' superdiversity, respondents also stressed some of its perceived disadvantages. **For one, on the flipside of being exposed to many international nationalities and cultures, respondents often regretted their limited interactions with Belgians and resulting partial "integration" into Belgian society**. Although some respondents acknowledged having a Belgian circle – or life partners – especially amongst those who had been in Belgium for longer periods of time, most interactions with Belgians in both their personal and professional lives were limited, or superficial at best. Several respondents even joked that Belgians "*did not exist*" (Dimitra, 22; Raffaele, 42). After welcoming the fact that her life in Brussels allowed her to meet and form meaningful relations with like-minded international professionals, Ioanna (35, Greek) stated that there were few reasons and motivations to socialize with locals and get interested in the daily realities of the country more generally. As she poignantly explained:

> *(...) it's very interesting, the sense of belonging in Brussels: On the one hand, you do feel that you belong to this group of people [international people], but you do not belong to the broader context of this country. Like, you're in the country but you're living parallel lives. And I think that's also the negative. You know, there is no need for all these people to really... they live and they breathe [the same air] in the [same] country but they don't really know much about it because they don't really have to, right? Because if you do not interact with Belgians, like, how would you know what is going on in the country? And that is a negative.*

The lack of opportunities to interact with Belgians was often explained by **different residential choices and practices** – with Belgians often perceived to live outside of Brussels or in different communes than foreign nationals (Anita, 30; Ioanna, 35). Respondents often justified their lack of interest in Belgian current affairs by the country's **lack of overarching national identity**. By extension, Brussels was perceived to be neglected by Belgians, turning it into a sort of "*non-place*" (Andrea, 31, Italian) which **lacked a defining culture or identity**. For Luigi (44, Italian): "*this city probably belongs to many people, but it doesn't really belong to anyone and not even to the Belgians"*. After suggesting that the Flemish and Walloons identified more with their respective regions' capital or main city, such as Antwerp or Namur,[9] he added:

[9] Our respondent's assumption that Antwerp was the capital of Flanders (although it is in fact Brussels) reveals a generalized misunderstanding of Belgium's complex administrative system.

> *(…) sometimes you have the feeling that Brussels is not so well taken care of because nobody is caring so much about it. Because there's isn't this sense of cultural identification with the city as being "our city" or "my city", and "we are proud". It's probably not this sort of cultural pride that you have in other European capitals (…).*

Some respondents also pointed out that **the Belgian population itself had gone through an important cultural mix due to previous waves of immigration**. For Osman (36, Turkish), this further complicated the task of defining the so-called Belgian identity:

> *Yes, we see two families who are Belgian, but when we ask them: "Do you support Belgium in the World Cup?", they say: "Ah! My grandmother is German, my father is Portuguese… I support Portugal!", you know? [they laugh] Even them, they don't express themselves 100% Belgian, so I think it's quite difficult to find a real Belgian, here in Brussels!*

Other perceived disadvantages were linked more generally to the **difficulties of living in a foreign environment** – including adaptation challenges, language barriers, feelings of homesickness or in-betweenness. Such difficulties often led our respondents to openly identify as "*migrants*" or "*immigrants*".[10] Although none of our respondents reported having experienced racism or xenophobia, one Turkish respondent alluded to instances where he felt that his apparent differences ("*not speaking French*", "*[not being] blonde*", having "*a funny name*", in his own words) had led prospective clients to take him less seriously.

Lastly, a minority of respondents were particularly critical about the **fact that Brussels' acceptance of diversity had gone "too far", explicitly constructing certain groups as undesirable "others"**. Indeed, several respondents felt culturally threatened and formulated essentializing remarks against certain groups (for instance: "*people from the Maghreb*", "*Polish workers*", "*Turks and Arabs*") whom they blamed for petty crime, anti-civic conduct, a lack of will to "*integrate*", "*imposing*" their culture and creating "*ghettos*", amongst other accusations. Muslim communities, and particularly women wearing the *hijab*, were targeted by Islamophobic remarks and constructed as posing a cultural threat, as illustrated by the following quote:

> *(…) You know, when you walk on Anspach Boulevard [in Brussels' city center], it feels more like Casablanca than Brussels! And I don't like this! I don't like it because if I wanted to live in Casablanca, I would be in Casablanca, not in Brussels! This is too… unicultural, you see? I'm tired of seeing veiled women crossing the street from every corner, you see. I do not like the veil, I'm against it, you see… frankly, it hurts me. It is the same in the metro: I often see veiled women on the line that I use (…) this is not multicultural in my view. I like multiculturalism, but not this, you see. It becomes a bit monotonous*. (Alexandros, 62, Greek)[11]

[10] See draft paper: "Migrant self-identification and empathy amongst privileged migrants in Brussels" (Working paper presented at the 2022 ISA Annual Conference)

[11] Quote translated from French.

"Living in a bubble" and limited intergroup contact

Based on an ethnographic case study of Euro-American expatriates in Indonesia, Fechter (2012) goes against the assumption that contemporary transnational spaces are "*progressive*", arguing instead that expatriates' transnational spaces "*do not exhibit openness and fluidity, but seem to reinforce boundaries, reintroduce traditions and insist on differences*" (2012: 49). In doing so, she mobilizes the metaphor of the "bubble", which alludes to the "*floating character*" and "*double-remoteness*" of expatriates, vis-à-vis their home country and host country. As shown previously, our respondents regularly acknowledged that in spite of this super-diversity, they actually had limited contacts with Belgians, or with certain migrant communities, often alluding to the **juxtaposition of national-regional and class-based "bubbles**" in Brussels, such as the "*Italian/Turkish/Greek bubble*", the "*EU/European bubble*", the "*international bubble*", or the "*expat bubble*".[12]

On the one hand, these bubbles were formed on the basis of **national (or regional) cultural belonging**. Indeed, many respondents shared the feeling of forming a "distinct" community of co-nationals who shared many cultural similarities and interests. Some explained that meeting with their co-nationals was "*easier*", given their numerical significance and the "*natural link*" uniting them. This resulted in a strong sense of ingroup solidarity and, in many cases, in our respondents' active participation in national-based associations or networks. Luigi (44, Italian) explained how the Italian community became an important support system for him:

> *What also made it easy was the fact that here there is a large Italian community of people that have actually the same migratory history that I have, with whom I share the same kind of experience. And naturally for me, this became a network that I could sort of rely on for personal matters. So, in fact, a lot of my friends are Italian – well, most of them, most of the people I see outside of work are Italian.*

Regional belonging was also a pertinent marker of ingroup solidarity, as Italians, Greek and Turkish respondents often mentioned their affinities with other "*Southern Europeans*" or "*Mediterraneans*" - or with the "*Hellenic community*", in the case of some Greek respondents.

Importantly, our respondents (whom were all first-generation migrants, apart from one Belgo-Turkish respondent) often perceived that the "historical" communities of Italian, Greek and Turkish immigrants in Belgium and their descendants constituted an additional, separate community, demonstrating **clear internal boundaries within national groups**. Distinctions between "new" and "old" migrants were largely based upon work experience, migration drivers, level of educational attainment, mindset, integration in Belgian society, or residential choices. Amongst Turkish respondents in particular, many sought to distinguish themselves from "*the Schaerbeek community*" or "*the Turkish people in Schaerbeek*".[13] For instance, Samet (59, Turkish), whose business is located in Schaerbeek, explained how this community differed from the "*executive-level*" and "*educated*" Turkish people he was more used to interacting with outside of work:

[12] Similarly, Ioanna (35, Greek) referred to "*the EU people*" as her "*tribe*".

[13] The municipality of Schaerbeek is famous for hosting a large Turkish people and/or people of Turkish ancestry.

> *Yeah, actually they are... I would say third generation. They are fluent in French, but they are still keeping Turkish values, quite religious. Quite supportive of Erdoğan! [laughs] And quite conservative, let me put it that way. But again, yeah, as long as they respect me, I respect them, we can find a way!*

On the other hand, and as shown by the previous example, distinctions were also maintained along **class lines**. Many respondents explained that they valued their interactions with other "*highly-skilled*", "*educated*", "*ambitious*" individuals who were part of the 'EU', 'cosmopolitan', 'expat' or 'Brussels' "bubble".

Interestingly, respondents were sometimes **split between a sense of comfort induced by belonging to a community, and a certain uneasiness regarding this form of separateness and *entre-soi*.** Several respondents were actively trying (or had actively tried in the past) to keep a distance from their national community, especially at the beginning of their stay in Brussels. For instance, Emanuele (41, Italian) explained that he did not want to "*create Little Italy in Brussels*", while Markos (61) and Alexandros (62) mentioned disliking or "[not wanting] *to live in a Greek ghetto*". Many also pointed out to the **limits of this "international bubble", describing it as "suffocating"** (Antonis, 41, Greek), as well as **overwhelming and superficial** at times. For instance, Silvio (52, Italian), acknowledged that although diversity could be "*exciting and enriching*" at first, one was then forced to "*make a synthesis of all this diversity*". He further argued that it could *"become dispersive and even impoverishing because it (...) does not allow you to go in-depth, both in terms of human relations and of the knowledge of other cultures and other habits"*. Other respondents echoed the feeling that they were merely scratching the surface of Brussels' diversity, acknowledging that they mostly formed meaningful and sustainable ties with other Europeans or internationals from similar socio-professional backgrounds, but were in practice insufficiently exposed to non-Europeans. Besides, many respondents seemed to **equate super-diversity or multiculturalism to the mere exposure to a variety of foreign languages and cuisines rather than to the building of meaningful relationships with people from different nationalities and/or cultures**. As a result, super-diversity was often experienced passively rather than through active and meaningful intercultural exchanges and dialogue.

Conclusion

The notion of super-diversity, whether praised or criticized, strongly resonated with my (migrant) respondents. On the one hand, they largely presented both their migration experience and Brussels' super-diversity in a positive light. Indeed, many felt that Brussels offered a unique opportunity to be exposed to (and enriched by) cultural diversity, and to "*belong*" as foreigners within a truly de-nationalized setting. On the other hand, respondents often questioned the city's diverse and intercultural nature, owing to the overlap of distinct communities – or "bubbles" – bound in national, supranational and/or class identities.

These findings thus bring nuance to common representations of Brussels as a cosmopolitan "melting pot", presenting it instead as a "patchwork" which reflects a "*juxtaposition of different cultural elements from different times, from different communities*" (Luigi, 44). I further demonstrated how limited interactions between certain migrant populations, as well as

between migrant and native populations, exacerbated symbolic boundaries between these groups. Whilst class and national-cultural belonging appeared as a strong marker of ingroup solidarity amongst the so-called "international expat community" or "bubble", certain migrants and other marginalized groups (such as Muslims, or previous generations of Greek, Italian and Turkish migrants) were actively constructed as "others" due to their belonging to a different national, ethno-racial, religious, class, citizenship, or migration category.

In the framework of my dissertation, I further build upon these findings to understand how lived experiences and threat perceptions of privileged migrants positively or negatively affect their migrant othering and solidarity practices, questioning the generalized assumption that multicultural environments and advantageous socio-economic positions breed tolerance and acceptance of people's differences. Understanding the different limits to intergroup contact in our respondents' living environment can serve as a first step towards understanding how prejudice develops amongst them and further impacts their threat perceptions and attitudes towards migrants, whether in the country of origin or of destination.

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