

Migrant's identity re-positioning in Berlin and London

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INTRODUCTION

This briefing presents selected relevant findings from the qualitative research carried out by the Italian team under the WP4 of the Growth, Equal Opportunities, Migration and Markets (GEMM) Project. One should bear in mind that our sample targeted only migrants active in the labour market and in specific activity domains (architecture, financial services, healthcare and ICT, for the highly skilled; construction, care-work and hospitality services for the low skilled). We interviewed Bulgarian, Romanian, Italian and Spanish migrants who live and work in London or in Berlin.

FINDINGS

IDENTITY RE-POSITIONING: A TYPOLOGY



The migration process can provoke considerable changes in a person's self-understanding, cultural identification and orientation to national and supranational political communities. Exposure to and interaction with individuals from different national and cultural groups can have a destabilizing effect on migrants' identities, either strengthening the previously held sense of belonging to the home country or challenging the 'pre-existing' national and/or supranational identification. Migrants define their identity and express feelings of attachment to different territorial and cultural entities. The focus is on the country of origin, the receiving society (at the local-city and/or national-country level), as well as at the supranational EU level.

Changes of both self-images and cultural/identity patterns are a pretty complex issue. In introductory - and somewhat schematic - terms, it is possible to highlight four types.

Re/Identification with Country of Origin

A common subjective self-identification of our respondents is the cultural attachment with the country of origin. In all four case studies, first and foremost, the majority of the respondents expressed their sense of rootedness to the cultural tradition of the home country. Strong identification with the home country culture does not seem to correlate with migrants' socio-demographic characteristics, that is their age, level of education, profession, length of stay, citizenship status and gender. However, the analysis of the interviews suggests the importance of historical, political and socio-economic contexts in shaping identities. For instance, Bulgarians' and Romanians' attachment to their home country may be shaped by problematic reception in the receiving society whereas Italians and Spaniards seem to 'rediscover' certain traits of their home society they were less aware of previous to migration, encouraging them to reaffirm their attachment to lifestyles and values in the country of origin they perceive as absent from the country of residence. Strong identification with Italian and Spanish culture is often framed in opposition to the local cultural model of the host society.

The Bulgarians in the home country should know how much the emigrants care about their homeland, how they preserve the traditions and how much money they send to relatives in Bulgaria (BG.IT.AC.2.M.35).

Maybe more Spanish than before, yes. [...] I'm more conscious of the cultural differences, in general, [between Germany and Spain] and of the different characters, which somehow makes me prefer [the Spanish character and culture] (SP.DE.AC.13.F.39)

[My identity] has absolutely not changed ... I mean it has not changed so much in me ... In fact, I feel maybe even more Italian, since when I arrived here, there was no identity.. Now that I'm here, I make comparisons all the time ... In short, I feel more Italian now (IT.DE.AC.8.F.28).

German never! But not because I hate the Germans, but perhaps because I still perceive them far from what is my way of being in general. I perceive myself Italian, and then maybe I'll become Spanish, I do not know I would like to learn that language too. But yes, I feel Italian (IT.GEDE.AC.18.M.27 - Nurse)

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Acculturation or “disidentification”

A second identity pattern concerns the internalization of the national culture of the host society while developing a more critical vision of their society of origin than they had in the past (detachment from the predominating mentalities in the ‘home culture’). East European informants are more inclined to differentiate themselves from their fellow nationals who are also emigrants; while West European ones most commonly create distinctions with those ‘left behind’ or with the prevailing ‘Mediterranean mentality’ in their home societies. All these subjects perceive and describe themselves in positive and idealized terms as resilient people able to overcome deeply internalized cultural habits. Those who ‘stayed behind’, are described in essentialised and reified terms as ‘cultural-dopes’, unable to free themselves from the bonds of the culture of origin. Hence, the subjects of reference for Italians and Spaniards tend to be those who remain behind, rather than migrant co-nationals as is more the case for Romanians and Bulgarians

Sincerely I feel less Romanian [...] There are people and there are people. Being Romanian is not always a proud thing in Spain because due to the wrong doings of many here. [RO.ES.AC.3.M.31]

I cannot stand certain things about it [Italy] anymore. [...]. The myopia of the typical Italian, in the sense of this parochialism, these “factions” (dissenting groups). Italy is going nowhere; our mentality is overly defensive. [...] I have known different people, I have seen different things - for better or for worse - I have had many more experiences. The first year, I spent was could be comparable to having spent ten years in Italy, in the sense that I have seen so many more things, many more contexts [...] We are far behind, far less civilized, far less respectful of the rules. (IT.UK.AC.8.M.40)

Here, I feel changed. How can I explain this...Here, I really realized just how raucous I was. ... Raucous in the sense that we [Spaniards] yell a lot, you know? My character has changed, my way of behaving ... I can't stand when people yell now, it bothers me. [...] You end up acting [differently] because it's what you see around you. It's the right way [to act]. I've realized that the right way is this, not what I was doing before. Throwing trash on the ground, crossing at a red light, this isn't good behaviour. The thing is, in Spain, you do it and no one will say anything, it's normalized. (SP.DE.AC.21.M.36)]

I've never been so ‘radical’. I felt like a stranger even in my own house; in my own city. I am someone who lives in the world: wherever you put me, I can stay. [London] is a city that leaves you alone, it does not judge you. If there is someone who judges you, it is because he is Italian. Because, otherwise, they leave you alone. They also give you opportunities. London is built on this, eh. You feel at home in London. (IT.UK.AC.19.M.42 - Cook)

As a result of an Erasmus exchange and Masters programme in Maastricht and Denmark, [...] I've ended up feeling more European and also more removed from the ‘standard’ of what is considered Spanish culture. [...] I didn't have many expectations when I came to Berlin. The only minimum expectation that I had was in terms of the job experience and the experience of living abroad. But I have found much more than that. I have found friends, I have found...I don't know, values that I didn't have before, I have developed a much broader view of the world.(SP.GE.AC.22.M.29)

Cosmopolitanism / European identity

The third type of identity pattern is related to cosmopolitan and European identifications. These attitudes concern those individuals who may simultaneously value national cultural references of the country of origin while also adapting easily to new lifestyles. Not only do these individuals embrace new cultural environments, but they also tend to define their new identities as being in-between two or three ‘worlds’: the country of origin, the country of destination and a supranational European and/or cosmopolitan identity. In this respect, prior mobility experiences (mainly through student exchange schemes) together with the duration of EU membership of the countries of origin under investigation make it more likely that individuals identify themselves in this category

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Cosmopolitanism / European identity

Many respondents confirmed the ease of inclusion in the urban contexts of Berlin and London, which were perceived as very international and open to integrating foreigners. Furthermore, some respondents specifically trace their cosmopolitan attitudes as being shaped or strengthened by the to the metropolitan/multicultural and globalized context in which they are living.

Living in London puts you in touch with the world. For example, I work in a team where there is an Italian, I, a Spaniard, a Frenchman, a girl from Hong Kong, my boss is an American, a Lebanese. There are 4 English and one German (IT.UK.AC.14.M.36)

I: Do you ever feel like someone from here, like a Berliner?

P: Yes. Not like a German, but I sometimes feel like a Berliner. [...] I feel very comfortable in Berlin. (SP.GE.AC.22.M.29)

BEYOND THE TIPOLOGY: TACTICAL IDENTIFICATION

Overall, identity show a fundamentally positional nature. Interviewees are aware that they have acquired a variety of cultural references together with a cross-cultural communicative competence that allow them to cope with many different situations of everyday life, deliberately and consciously staging a multiplicity of dramatis personae:

“When I go to a pub on Sunday to have lunch I feel like a foreigner, because here in the pubs on Sundays there are only the English. When I go to work I feel English, when I go to the bank I feel English. When I go to the airport I feel English. When I go for shopping I feel Italian. When I go to eat for dinner I feel Italian. When I come home I feel a bit 'both'. When I know someone who comes from Europe, like France, Spain, I feel English. (IT.UK.AC.11.F.28 - Midwife).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create more opportunities for early mobility (during high-school and university), strengthening exchange programmes between E.U. countries.
- Develop the Erasmus Plus programme further to target students and workers in manual trade occupations/vocational training in order for them to acquire EU mobility experience and international labour market skills at an early stage.
- Focus on previous mobility experience that can both stimulate multicultural attitudes and facilitate cultural integration of intra-European migrants.