

**TOWARDS WELL-BEING, THROUGH EDUCATION
AND CULTURAL INTEGRATION.
A CASE STUDY OF ROMANIAN WHITE-COLLAR
IMMIGRANTS IN BRUSSELS**

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Abstract

The decision to emigrate is almost always preceded by a period of unhappiness, and those who leave their homeland rely on this major change to improve their well-being. The strategies used by immigrants to integrate socially in the host country differ depending on several factors, such as: age, education, marital status, religion, connection to pre-existing support networks between compatriots, language proficiency or their long-term projections. In this paper we deliver a case study revealing a new pattern of migration: exponents of the Romanian middle class who choose emigration in their mid-life considering that Brussels, more than any other potential destination, ensures favourable conditions to reach their well-being aspirations. The study is a qualitative research based on data obtained through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, correlated with official quantitative data provided by Statbel, Eurostat, the European Commission, and the European Parliament on the migration of Romanians, particularly focusing on those with tertiary education. The findings of this research define the highly skilled Romanian immigrants in Brussels as a population that capitalizes on 1) European citizenship 2) tertiary achievement and 3) multilingualism, thus obtaining a transnational lifestyle and a stage of well-being that was still inaccessible in their country of origin, regardless of social status.

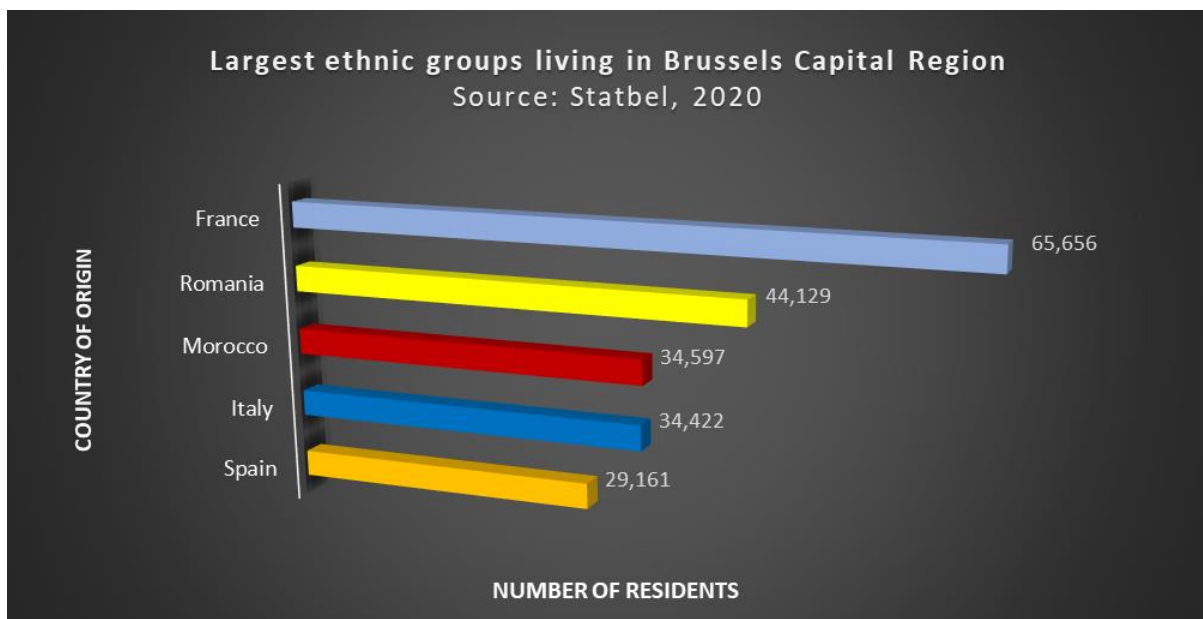
Keywords: Brussels-Capital Region; education; EU employment; European identity; mobility; Romanian migration; transnational lifestyle; white-collar immigrants; well-being.

Introduction

Within the European Union, Romania continues to be the country” exporting” the largest number of migrants. In 2020, Romanian immigrants accounted for 19,4% of the total Romanian population (Eurostat, 2020). The main destination countries for settling are Italy – 30%, Germany – 19,7%, Spain – 16,6%, the United Kingdom – 6,5%, France – 3%, but there is clear evidence that also the community of Romanians living in Belgium is growing at an accelerated pace. (OECD, 2019)

Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) has a population of 1,218,255 million, and 6 out of 10 residents were born outside Belgium. The interethnic mosaic in the Belgian capital is made up of 184 nationalities, and Romanians are the fastest growing community in recent years. According to the Belgian National Bureau of Statistics, at the beginning of 2020 the number of Romanian residents in the Brussels-Capital Region was 44,129 (Fig.1), becoming the second largest community of foreigners after the French (Statbel, 2020).

Fig.1 Largest ethnic groups living in Brussels-Capital Region



This statistic does not include those who have dual citizenship, both Romanian and Belgian. It should also be mentioned that the legislation requires to register with the municipality as a resident only if the uninterrupted stay exceeds three months. There are professions and types of contracts allowing the worker, in constructions for instance, to come for a project of a few weeks on a construction site, where the contractor offers accommodation and meals, and if the stay does not exceed three months, he has neither the obligation nor the need to make residence

documents. There are many Romanians who travel several times a year between Romania and Belgium, who maybe spend more time in Brussels than at home, but who are not included in any official database. However, as the figure above shows, the number of those who hold Romanian citizenship and residence documents in the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) is higher today than those who form ethnic groups with a long tradition of immigration in Belgium, such as Moroccans, the Italians, or the Turks. In other words, no one can accurately say how many Romanians live in BCR, but a simple reasoning tells us that their number could be considerably higher than the official data indicate.

Another relevant information in this specific context is that from 2009 to 2019 the number of those with tertiary educational attainment increased among Romanian mobile citizens from 12.5% to 15% (Eurostat, 2020). We have a clear indication that many of them came to Brussels based on the principle of geographical balance in the European institutions. This principle has been increasingly mentioned as the Union has expanded to new Member States, seeking to achieve within a limited time an adequate level of representation of the citizens of the new Member States (Report From The Commission To The European Parliament And The Council pursuant to Article 27 of the Staff Regulations of Officials and to Article 12 of the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Union (Geographical balance) 2018). To harmonize the share of Member States, indicative rates were introduced in 2003 to equitably balance the need to reflect the composition of the EU population and, at the same time, to ensure a minimum representation of smaller Member States. The indicative rate for Romania is 4.5% and, according to a report on human resources in 2020, the employment target for Romanian citizens at the European Commission has been almost reached. Out of the total of 32,847 employees, 4.2% are Romanian citizens. (European Commission, Human Resources Dept., 2020) In the European Parliament, the share of Romanians is even higher than in the European Commission, reaching 4.6% in 2018 (Annual Report on the human resources of the European Parliament 2018). From 2008 to 2018, the number of Romanian civil servants increased by 136.8%. The annual report on human resources of the European Parliament from 2018 showed that 65.4% of the total staff of Romanian citizenship are women, and the average age of Romanian employees is 40.

In the absence of previous studies on the education of Romanian immigrants from BCR, the growing number of Romanians working in European institutions, where the basic criterion for entry is to have a bachelor's degree and speak two of the official languages in the EU, confirms our thesis that BCR is the pole of attraction for Romanian white-collar immigrants. Another confirmation was hidden in the centralization of applications submitted during 2010-2017 by

Romanian citizens for EPSO competitions (The European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) is responsible for selecting staff to work for the institutions and agencies of the European Union. Each institution is then able to recruit staff from among the pool of candidates selected by EPSO. On average, EPSO receives around 60,000-70,000 applications a year with around 1,500-2,000 candidates recruited by the European Union institutions. Leaving aside the low success rate of only 0.4%, we note the decision of 25,933 Romanians to enter competitions for a European civil servant position. Romanians are surpassed in this respect only by Italians, with 49,325 applications in the same period and Spaniards, with 27,569 applications submitted (Annual Report on the human resources of the European Parliament – 2018, 4.5 Parliament Secretariat staff demographics in 2018).

Objective of the study

This article aims to investigate whether and why the Brussels-Capital Region has become a favourite emigration destination for Romania's middle class.

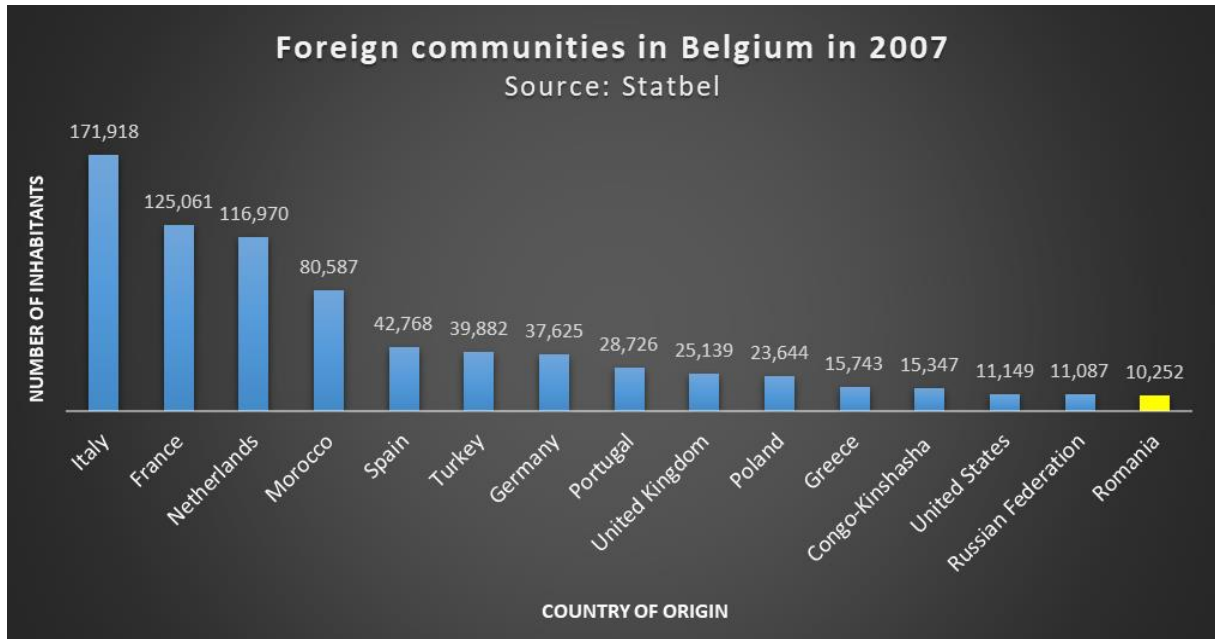
Background

Until the fall of communism, Belgium was a safe haven for members of several Romanian noble families and dissident intellectuals who had managed to get out of the Iron Curtain (Van Mol C. & de Valk H., 2016; Horváth I., 2007). Their number was small and the ones who arrived in Belgium at that time were most often asylum seekers. In fact, we cannot talk about Romanian migration to Western Europe before until after 1990, when skilled and unskilled workers began to prospect opportunities to find work, most often in construction sites or in agriculture.

However, for the Romanians of the first wave of migration who went to work abroad immediately after the fall of communism, Italy and Spain were the favourite destinations. The cultural and linguistic compatibility between Romanians and Italians or Spaniards is also seen in the magnitude of the communities living in the two Peninsulas: 1,032,300 Romanian residents in Italy and 572,700 living in Spain (OECD, 2019). These figures are relevant not only as indicators for the demography of the two Mediterranean countries, but also as pools of mobile Romanian citizens within the EU. Romanian residents living nowadays in Belgium arrived on three distinct migration corridors: from Romania, Italy, and Spain.

In 2007, the year of Romania's accession to the European Union, the community of Romanians in Belgium barely numbered more than 10,000 people (Fig.2), and the dominating foreign community back then were the Italians followed by the French and the Dutch.

Fig. 2 Foreign communities in Belgium in 2007



Thirteen years later, the Romanian community in Belgium had ten times more residents (Fig. 3), registering the fastest growth, with a numerically representative population in all three Regions: 44,129 in Brussels-Capital, 45,118 in Flanders and 16,111 residents in Wallonia (Fig. 4).

Fig.3 Foreign communities in Belgium in 2020

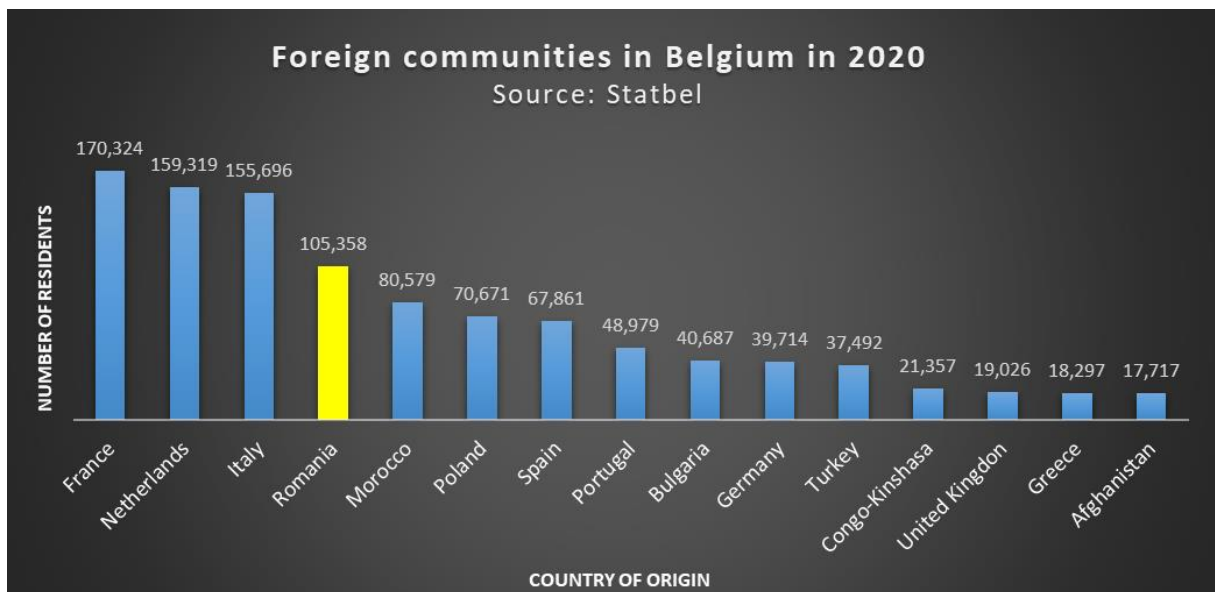
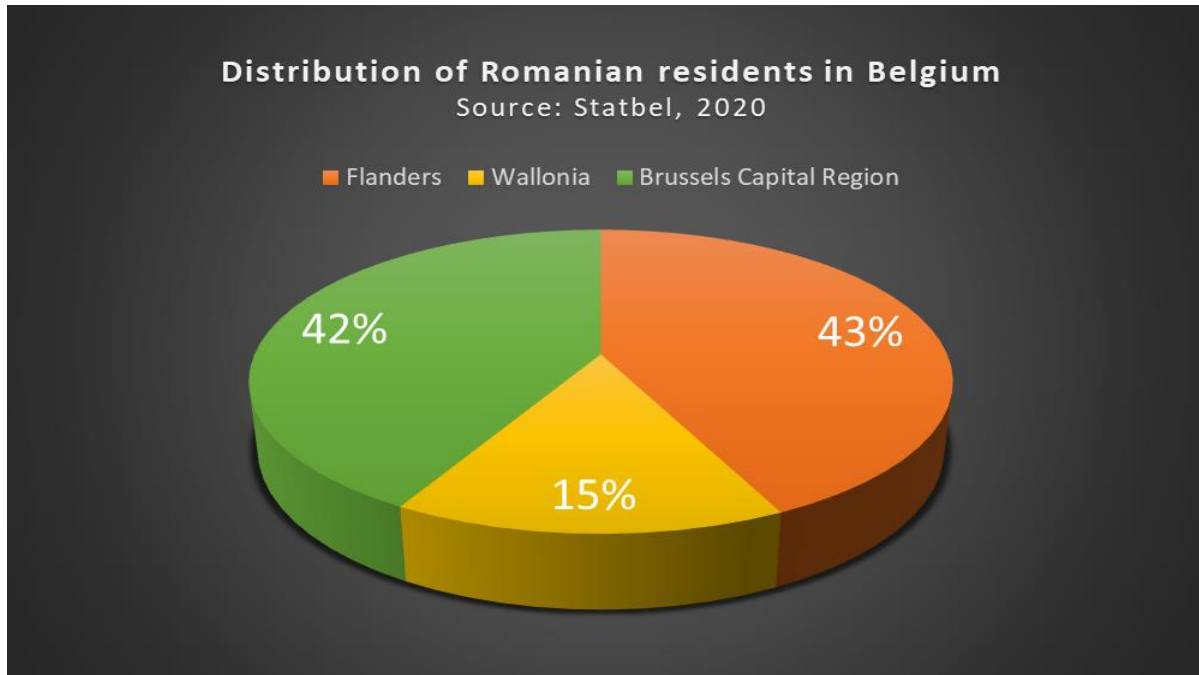
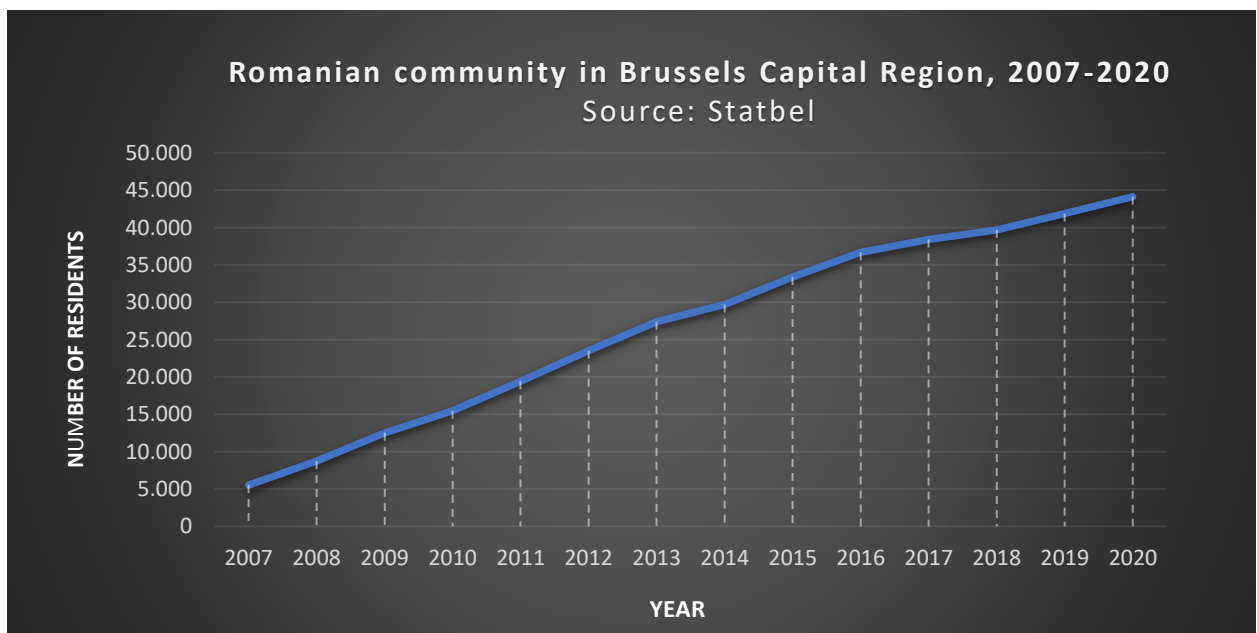


Fig.4 Distribution of Romanian residents in Belgium



According to the OECD report from 2019, the peak of Romanian emigration to the wider world coincided with the country's accession to the European Union, migration values doubling in the first year after accession, which is also reflected in the migration to the Brussels-Capital Region (Fig. 5).

Fig.5 Romanian community in Brussels Capital Region, 2007-2020



In this second wave of Romanian migration, there are professionals from the most diverse breaches, but the wave is clearly dominated by medical staff.

Data and methodology

This study is based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques pursuing to define and frame a new migratory flow from Romania to Brussels and to describe its features. Starting from a thorough analysis of demographic data regarding Romanians in Belgium provided by Statbel - the National Bureau of Statistics of Belgium and the Eurostat data on mobility and tertiary attainment, the methods of collecting qualitative data for the present research are: 1) the Google Forms online survey in which seventy Romanian citizens living in Brussels participated and 2) the testimonies obtained in the semi-structured interviews with ten Romanian citizens from the middle class of Romania who settled with their families in Brussels after 2014. Their profile data can be consulted in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile data of the participants.

Initials	Age	Gender	Profession	Marital status	Place of birth	Place of residence before Brussels	Year of arrival	Commune of residence in Brussels
R.F.	40	F	Business analyst	Married, with children	Bucharest	Bucharest	2019	Woluwe - Saint-Pierre
A.T.	33	F	Economist	Married	Bucharest	Bucharest	2017	Ixelles
D.C.	45	F	Engineer	Married, with children	Bucharest	Bucharest, Romania	2019	Woluwe - Saint Lambert
C.C.	46	M	Software Engineer	Married, with children	Bucharest	Oslo, Norway	2018	Woluwe - Saint-Lambert
D.Ci.	34	F	Director of Government Affairs	Engaged	Sibiu	Bucharest	2014	Ixelles

A.T.	32	F	Doctor	Married	Bucharest	Bucharest	2019	Woluwe - Saint - Lambert
Co.R.	33	F	Doctor	Married	Buzău	Bucharest	2015	Uccle
E.P.	42	F	Teacher	Married, with children	Deva, Hunedoara	Bucharest	2019	Woluwe Saint - Lambert
C.R.	40	M	Construction contractor	Married, with children	Craiova, Dolj	Craiova	2014	Evere
S.G.	50	F	Hotel manager	Married	Piatra Neamț	Rome, Italy	2015	Watermael- Boitsfort

Demographics were then correlated with the timing of political decisions taken at national and/or European level concerning: 1. the freedom of movement of Romanians, 2. their membership in the European Union, 3. the imposition and suspension of restrictions on the labour market in Belgium. The research included one year of field investigation that involved meetings with Romanians on construction sites, at theatre performances and exhibitions, in churches, in hospitals, at the receptions of the Romanian Embassy, in European institutions, and this helped in refining the hypotheses as well as the definition of the population located in the core of the study.

All infographics published in this article represent the author's production using data extracted from official sources and answers obtained from online survey participants. As specified on each infographic, the calculations are based on the responses of 70 Romanian citizens residing since 2014 in the Brussels-Capital Region, and this should be borne in mind to avoid the misleading conclusion that findings are representative for the entire Romanian population living in Brussels.

Results

The latest wave of Romanian immigrants in Brussels-Capital Region is determined not so much by financial shortcomings as by a pronounced dissatisfaction with the quality of life (Mocanu, Boldureanu, Tiță & Boldureanu, D., 2020). Nowok et al. (2013) wrote about this expectation of the immigrant to be happy once he/she settles in a new place and about SWB - "subjective well-being", stressing the importance of well-being in the progress of a society. Therefore, this

study explored the motivations of the decision to leave Romania of a population that, by Romanian standards, had far above average incomes and a high level of education and, at the same time, to identify the reasons why these people chose Brussels to start all over. Since this migratory flow is only partially caused by the desire to earn more money, understanding the characteristics of this wave requires an in-depth analysis of the intellectual and emotional triggers that will make an individual, who apparently lacks nothing, to break away from his family and known places and start from scratch in an unknown country.

The OECD claims that since joining the European Union until 2019, Romania has lost around 39,000 nurses and over 20,000 doctors. As Vasîlcu, 2011 stated, "the doctors' reasons for leaving are manifold. The decision to emigrate is mainly based on financial reasons, but there are also other grounds. Among these, we can mention medical practice insecurity, unfit working conditions, obsolete technology, a limited professional career span in the country of origin, and, in the case of the female family migrants, the wish for their family to have access to a different living standard."

Co.R. is 33 years old, and she is a gynaecologist at a hospital in Brussels since 2015. She claims that she had financial stability in Romania, but she was not professionally fulfilled.

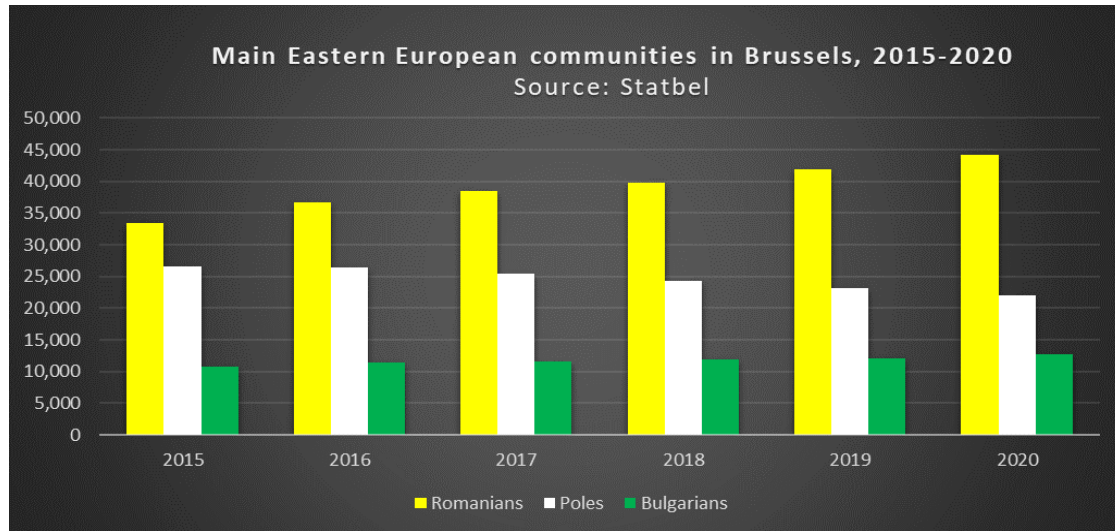
- "I was a resident, I didn't feel like I was evolving, it seemed to me that we were working very chaotically, everyone did what they wanted, and I was not at all satisfied with how the patients were looked after. I also had a problem with Romanian fashion to give birth by caesarean section upon request."

After five years in the healthcare system in Belgium, she believes that the quality of medical services is remarkably high, and she feels privileged to work here. She is pleasantly impressed that she is offered the proper conditions to make the best decisions for her patients at critical times.

- "For example, in Romania the doctor must assist the patient throughout labour, which can sometimes be exhausting not only for the mother but also for the doctor, who should be as clear and as focused as possible at birth. In Belgium, the doctor intervenes only at this moment, the labour being assisted by midwives. The role of midwives is severely diminished in Romania and there are not enough of them."

For several years after their country's accession to the EU, the Romanian community in Brussels was analysed in relation and by comparison to the other ethnic groups from Eastern Europe, the Poles and Bulgarians. However, as seen in Fig.6, the evolution of the Romanian community presents a completely different pattern.

Fig.6 Main Eastern European communities in Brussels, 2015-2020

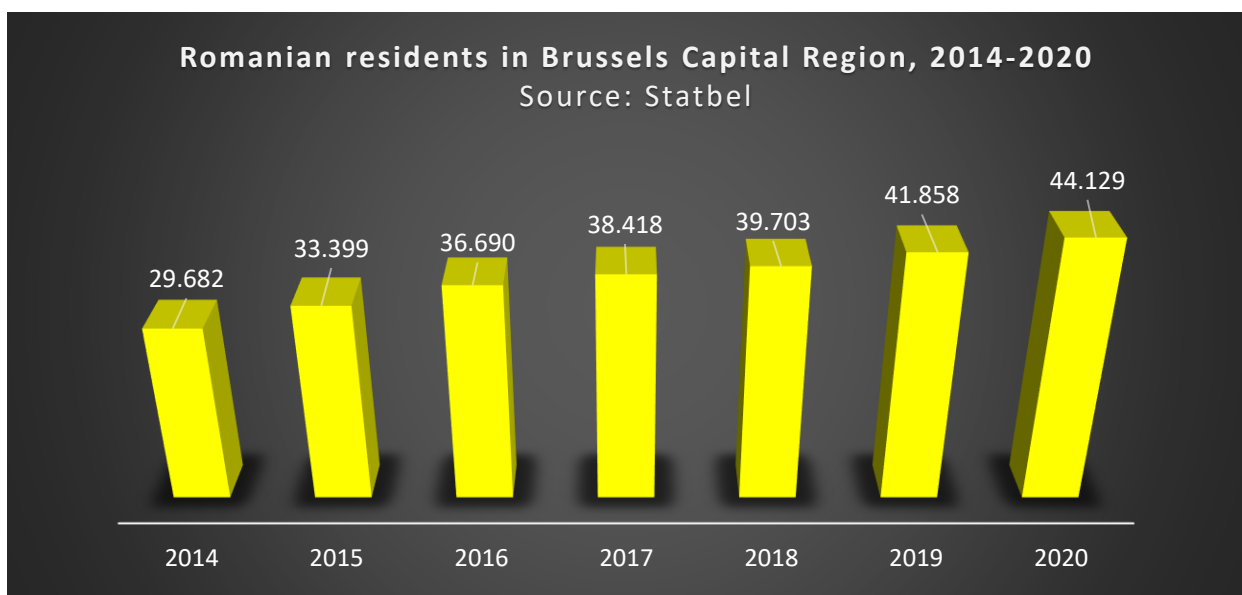


An IBSA study dating back to 2015 (Hermia & Vandermotten, 2015) noted that the Brussels-Capital Region had seen an unprecedented increase in the number of Romanians, Poles and Bulgarians in the last decade, so that on January 1, 2014, the three communities totalled 65,000 residents. Basically, one in seventeen people came from one of these three communities. The study ended with the observation that the flow of Polish migration to the Brussels-Capital Region had begun to decline in recent years. This is the moment when the Romanian community takes a considerable boost, while that of the Poles reaches a plateau phase, stagnating. As mentioned before, although Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU on 1 January 2007, the accession treaties allowed the other member states to apply transitional restrictions on the free movement rights of workers from these two Eastern-European states for up to seven years after accession, to protect against disruption of their labour markets. Belgium, along with Austria, Britain, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, and Spain, restricted the access of Romanians and Bulgarians to the labour market until the end of the transition period. It was not until January 1, 2014 that the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion László Andor announced the end of restrictions on free movement of workers from Bulgaria and Romania.

Consequently, we consider 2014 a milestone for the entry into Belgium of a considerable number of Romanian citizens who can finally enjoy all the rights and freedoms derived from European citizenship. The elimination of transitional restrictions on the Belgian labour market had a rather strong psychological effect among Romanians who were considering emigration but were still prospecting where to settle. Belgium suddenly became an attractive destination, and Brussels, through the presence of European institutions and other international bodies or

large companies where English is the main working language, offered the prospect of a brilliant career for many Romanians with higher education. As the Fig.7 below shows, the number of Romanians living in the Brussels Capital Region continues to grow. Although precise data on the level of education are not available, their increasing presence in positions requiring higher education in European institutions, in the IT sector, in Brussels hospitals, general practice or dentistry offices, in law firms or architecture offices, entitles us to conclude that those who settled in Brussels after 2014 are largely highly qualified Romanians.

Fig.7 Romanian residents in Brussels Capital Region, 2014-2020



In addition to entrepreneurial activity, C.R. is also the initiator of a Benelux branch of a Romanian civic organization. He knows the community well and organizes events and initiatives that periodically bring Romanians from Brussels together.

- "Since 2014, I have been meeting more and more highly educated Romanians in Brussels. Two years ago, at a fair, we gathered almost a hundred companies run by Romanians, employing Romanian workforce, and we had over three thousand Romanian visitors. I saw a state in a state there. Lawyers, dentists, endocrinologists, university professors, artists, cleaning companies, security companies, IT specialists, restaurants. Whatever you need, there is already a Romanian company here that can deliver what you want. I was looking around and I understood that there was actually the middle class of Romania."

Romanians have a saying: "I grabbed God by the foot" and they use it when someone or something saved them at the very last moment before collapsing. C.R. used the same expression

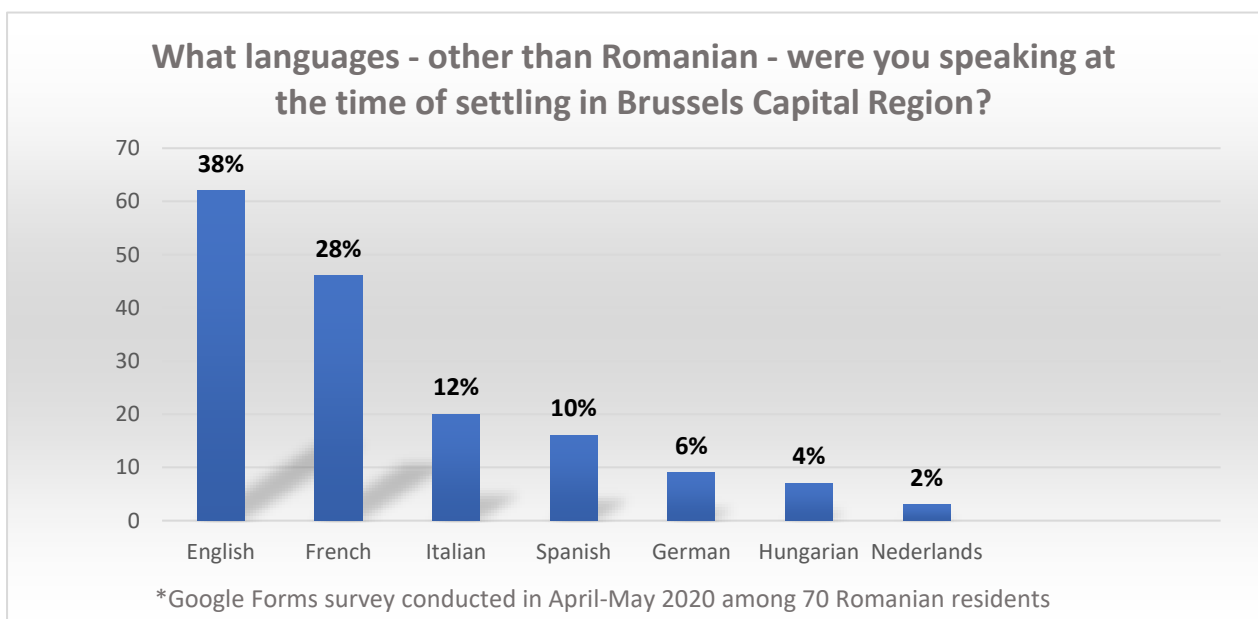
when referring to the first Flemish entrepreneur who offered him and his brothers the chance for longer-term contracts and the opportunity to learn new skills. Under the guidance of this contractor, C. R. started his own business and soon he understood that the chances of getting more clients and more profitable contracts would increase considerably if he learned Dutch.

- ” After improving my French, I enrolled in intensive Dutch courses. I was studying 4 hours a day, evening classes, from 18.00 to 22.00. The classes started after I had worked all day on the site, it was exhausting, but I was convinced that becoming fluent in Dutch would be the key to open many doors for us in Flanders and that's exactly what happened.”

Flanders covers 44.5% of Belgium's territory and represents most of the country's industry and workforce, the region providing 59.2% of the national gross domestic product (GDP, according to Eurostat, 2019). C.R. has meanwhile become one of the most important contractors in Brussels.

Along with the other reasons previously addressed, Brussels is also attractive for young Romanian professionals because in many institutions the main working language is English. 38% of those who answered the questionnaire say that they spoke English when they settled in Brussels, 10% more than the percentage of those who spoke French fluently, although Romanian is also a Romance language.

Fig.8 What languages – other than Romanian – were you speaking at the time of settling in Brussels Capital Region?



The percentages of Italian and Spanish speakers are in some cases the indicator that the residents arrived in Brussels not directly from Romania but from the large communities of Romanians who settled in the first and second wave in Italy and Spain. S. G. is 50 years old and has lived in Brussels since 2015, having previously worked in Italy and Israel. She is originally from Piatra Neamt, in Eastern Romania, where she worked in the Horeca industry as a boarding house administrator:

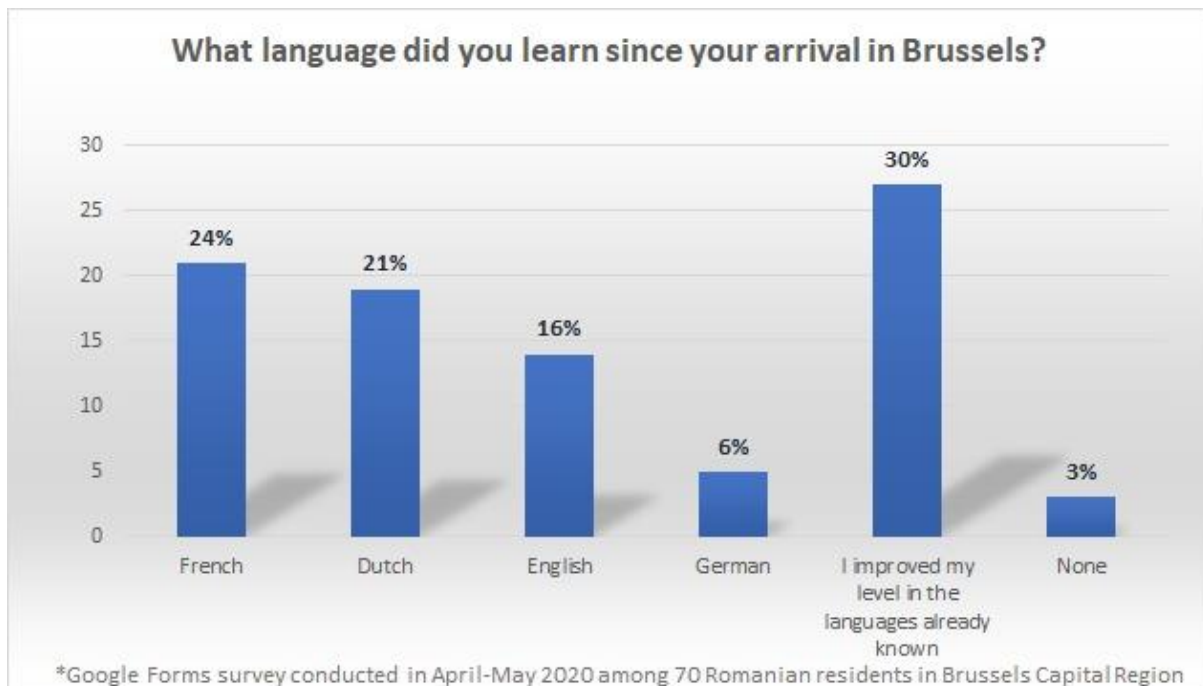
- “I was not satisfied with my income. One day I told myself that I could no longer work just to have something to eat and pay bills, because that was all I covered for a month's salary: food and utilities. I decided that I wanted to travel more, to take more care of myself, even if it meant leaving the country and having employment contracts below my level of education.”

A. T. is among the 2% who already knew Dutch when they came from Romania, this being a condition for getting a job as a doctor in a particular hospital:

- ” Since I already spoke Dutch, this helped me a lot when through the adaptation process. Here, if you speak good enough one of the languages and if you mind your own business, integration is not a problem.”

Romanian white-collar immigrants have long-term attachment plans that are proven by their high interest to acquire new skills and languages.

Fig.9 What language did you learn since your arrival in Brussels?

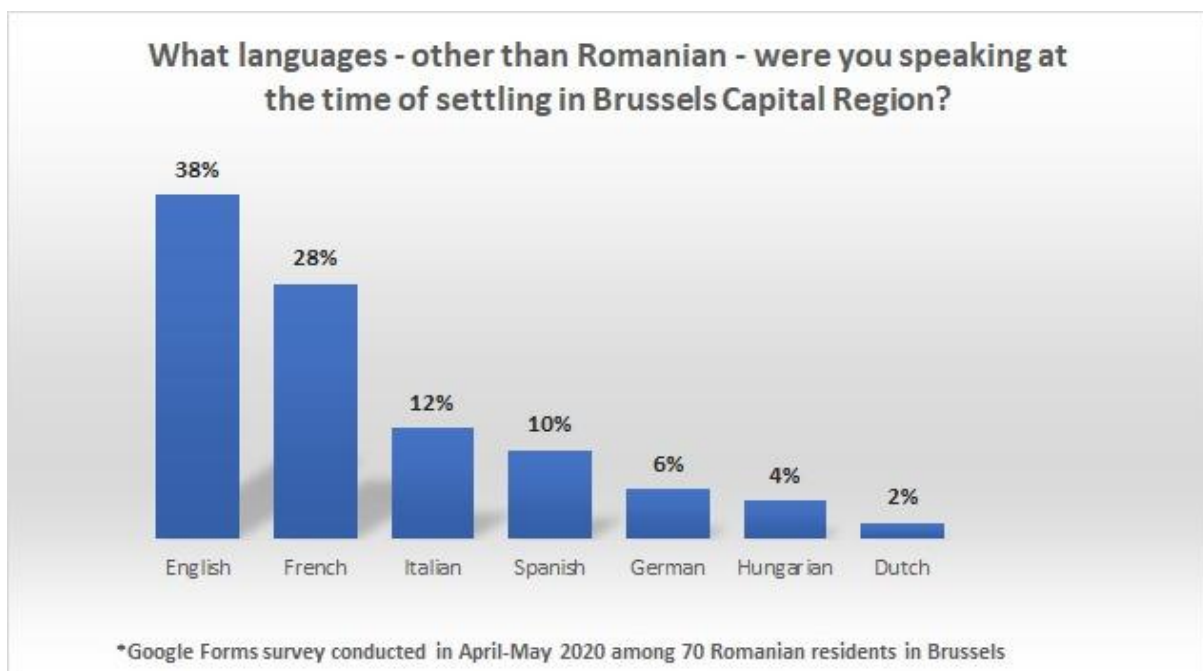


A.T. and her husband only need English at their workplace in Brussels, but they are still constantly improving their French:

- "Neither of us mastered French as well as English, so we enrolled in courses, but we still didn't have the courage to start learning Dutch. We are lucky that there is no pressure to advance quickly, only English is mandatory in our workplaces."

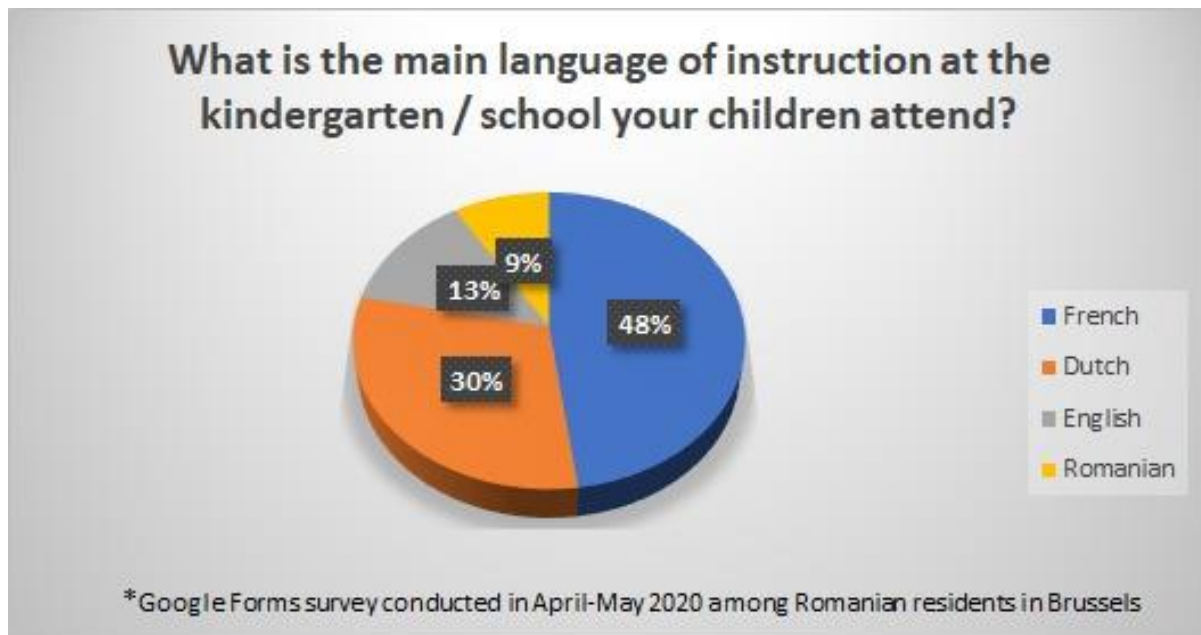
As the figure below shows, most of those who answered the Google Forms questionnaire have followed various forms of education since settling in Brussels, either language courses, specialization training in the basic profession, or even undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Only 17% of respondents had not attended any form of education so far.

Fig.10 Did you follow any form of education since you are settling in Brussels Capital Region?



Once in Belgium, the migrant is faced with an especially important decision for the future of his child: in which language to attend the nursery / kindergarten / high school? It is important to note that, although employees of European institutions can enrol their children in schools taught in Romanian, quite a few (9% of our respondents) access this possibility. Out of a total population of 27,708 pupils enrolled in all European schools - offering free education for the children of civil servants in all official EU languages - only 155 children are enrolled in the Romanian section, at the European school Brussels IV (Facts and figures on the beginning of the 2019- 2020 school year in the European Schools.).

Fig.11 What is the main language of instruction at the kindergarten or/and school your children attend?



Among the parents participating in this study, there is a difference in approach between those who came very recently and those who have been living in Belgium for some time. If at first, they are frightened by the level of difficulty of the Dutch language and are tempted to take them from French language schools. Later, they understand that only by knowing the Dutch language can they make the most of the educational and professional opportunities offered by the Kingdom of Belgium.

- C. C.” We researched a lot about schools and, although we saw that Dutch-speaking schools are better rated and there would be more chances on the labour market for those who speak Dutch, we still chose a French language school. I wanted to know that, if necessary, we can help her. My wife knows French quite well, but in Dutch it would be difficult to help her if she has difficulty with certain lessons.”

The same reasoning determined R. F. and her husband, who arrived in Belgium at the beginning of 2019, to choose a French-speaking school for their daughter.

- ” I enrolled the girl in a French-speaking school so that we could help her with her lessons if needed.”

C. R., however, who had already lived in Belgium for many years before having children, thought of their education plan in the most pragmatic way possible from the very beginning.

- "My children learned Dutch first, and now they go to an international school, where they are taught in English and French. They only speak Romanian at home, with us, and during the two months a year they spend with their grandparents in Romania."

46% of the participants in the Google Forms Survey were single when they emigrated, while married couples with or without children and those who claim to live in a stable though unofficial union represent 53% of the respondents to the questionnaire. If couples who do not have children yet, sometimes still consider the option of returning to Romania, for those who already have children there seems to be only one ambition: integration and obtaining Belgian citizenship. D. C. is convinced that by moving to Brussels they made the best decision for her daughter:

- " We believe that in Romania children no longer have a future. Our girl is now 11 years old and goes to a Catholic school. We wanted to integrate as soon as possible in the Belgian system, that is why we did not want to go to a European school with teaching in Romanian. I am sure that she will be much better here than in Romania. Here they teach them how to think, how to learn, this is what I have not seen developing in Romania. The school in Romania only asks you to memorize things that you will use to a small extent in your daily life. For me, it is important that she develops harmoniously from an emotional point of view and acquires the skills that will give her as much autonomy as possible."

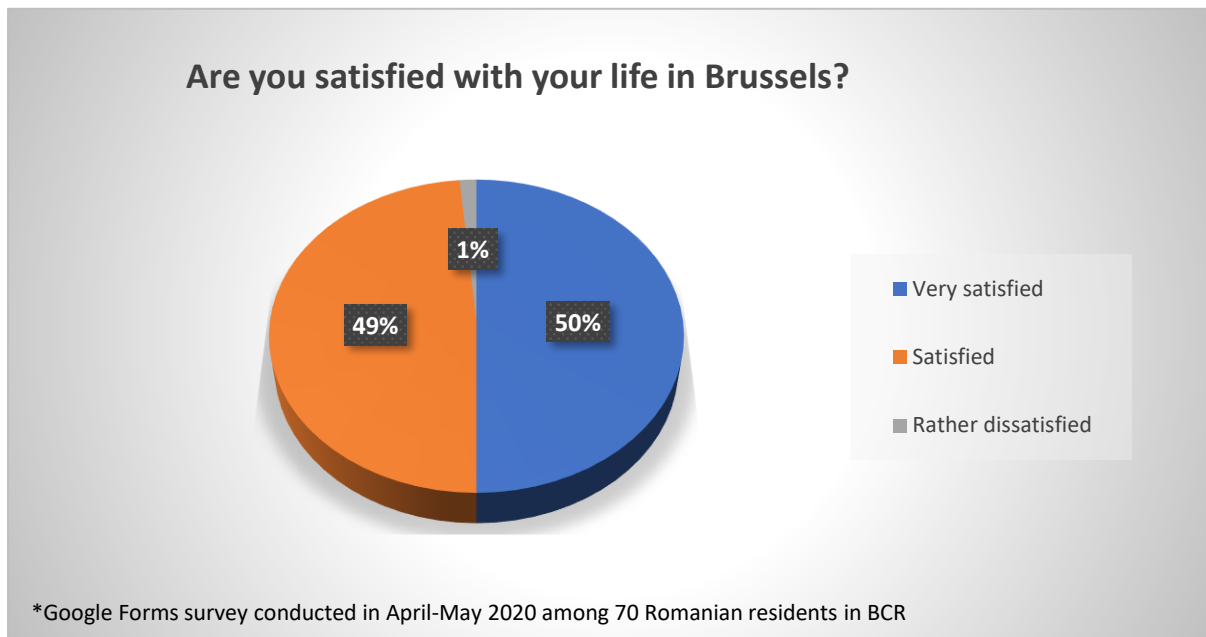
C.R. admits that he thought several times about returning to Romania but realized that he had become dependent on the multicultural atmosphere and the predictability of a system that he considers to be meritocratic. When his children were born, he knew that this was the world he wanted for them:

- "Brussels is this mixture of immigrants. It is a total feeling of acceptance; it does not really matter where you come from since most people were born elsewhere. Also, your social evolution is based on meritocracy. If you are good at something and you want to work, your chances are equal to anyone else's. After our business started to grow, we made real estate investments and loans. Then the family also grew, the children came, and they started school here. My children are happy in Brussels and we could not consider leaving this place anymore. Still, I don't see where we could have done better."

Romanian white-collar immigrants in Brussels claim that they reached the level of well-being they were looking for. Almost 100% of the participants in the Google Forms survey initiated in April-May 2020 say they are satisfied (49%) or very satisfied (50%) (Fig. 12) with their living standard in Brussels. They justify their enthusiasm by talking especially about positive

experiences in relation to the local administration, when they needed documents, or hospitals, when they had health problems, but they also mention the level of education of their neighbours and co-workers.

Fig. 12 Are you satisfied with your life in Brussels?



Arriving in a culture that does not appreciate the conflictual character but rather relies on diplomacy, Romanians in Brussels say that they feel accepted and validated. When asked: "Have you ever felt discriminated against because you are Romanian?", none of the subjects we interviewed gave an affirmative answer.

Conclusions and discussions

1. Unqualified Romanians create the need for highly qualified Romanians. When Romanian became the most spoken language on construction sites in Belgium, local entrepreneurs concluded that to communicate as effectively as possible with these workers who had become indispensable, it would be desirable for their superiors to speak Romanian as well. Large construction companies have started recruiting management from Romania. In other words, unskilled Romanian workers have the merit of creating the need for highly qualified Romanians on construction sites in Belgium.
2. The unusual mobility of Romanians compared to other Europeans is favoured by the negative situations experienced in their home country in relation to the public sector - administration, hospitals, schools and universities, police, etc. Romanian white-collar

immigrants in Brussels-Capital Region often perceive the Romanian state as an aggressor, while the Belgian state is seen as a partner that encourages them to evolve and prosper. Further studies should focus on the consequences of such a perception on Romanian society.

3. Although the Romanian civil servants would have the possibility to enrol their children in classes taught in Romanian, few of them access this facility. Given that out of over 105,000 Romanians living in Belgium, just over 16,000 live in Wallonia, the rest being divided almost equally between Flanders and Brussels, it is worth analysing in further research whether the second generation of Romanians will tip the scales in favour of the Dutch-speaking or French-speaking community.

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