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Polish EU Officials in Brussels: Analysis of an Emerging Community

SUMMARY

This article examines the process of emergence and consolidation of an expat community of over 2000 Polish EU Institutions officials in Brussels. This group appears quite alienated both from other Polish migrants in Belgium and from the local population. At the same time, they constitute a strongly integrated community. The objective of the present analysis is to explain the drivers and the dynamics of this process and to elucidate factors facilitating enclosure: anticipated rejection by local communities driven by national or professional stereotypes, identification with the EU Institutions, but also intensive networking activity. The study consists of two major parts. The theoretical part provides an insight to literature related to the social particularities of the EU officials in general. The empirical part examines processes observed specifically with regard to the Polish EU officials.

KEY WORDS: Polish EU community, encapsulation in space, *engrenage*, adaptation, social networks

1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars in the field of anthropology, traditionally focusing on the powerless, exotic “Other”, have for a long time neglected the importance of studying the contemporary elites in their own societies (Shore, 2002).¹ Shore and Black (1992: 10) complained that anthropologists had not seriously scrutinized the activities within the EU institutions. Although this situation has somewhat improved and there is, nowadays, a number of publications related to the EU civil servants from “old” Member States,² there had been no previous investigation focused specifically on

¹ Results presented here belong to more extensive research on the Polish EU community in Brussels. The author would like to thank the Polish EU Institutions employees who shared their opinions and experiences of living in Brussels as well as Prof. Dr. Johan Leman, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this article.

² Among the most important literature of the subject, the following works should be quoted: Abélès, 2000, 2004; Abélès, Bellier and McDonald, 2010; Bellier, 2000a, 2002; Bellier and Wilson, 2000; Shore, 2000); with focus on top Commission officials (Hooghe, 2001); specifically on British EU civil servants (Cailliez, 2004). A few studies on other categories of Polish migrants in Belgium are

Polish EU officials. Moreover, the available publications are quite old and often date back to the time when Poland was not even a Member of the European Union.

More recently, Suvarierol (2008, 2009) has examined the social networking patterns of EU Commission officials of different nationalities, while Favell (2001) has conducted research on Brussels' expats, not necessarily EU Institutions staff. There was also a study on "new" Member States EU officials, however without distinction between specific nationalities (Ban, 2007, 2009). Nonetheless, the group of Polish EU officials still remains understudied.

It is important to note that, except for Cailliez (2004), the aforementioned authors have written about EU civil servants as a more or less homogenous category, without taking into account their nationality. This leaves the picture incomplete. Indeed, it can be expected that some specifically national characteristics of EU officials or their lifestyles might affect the process of integration and their perception of the new environment and hence, their socialization in Brussels.

Treating all EU officials as a single group, independently of their nationalities, does not permit duly taking stock of linguistic, geographic or cultural considerations, and also make it difficult to take into account the perception and self-perception of different groups of EU officials in Belgium.

Indeed, the French, Dutch or Luxemburgish nationals will find it easy to communicate with local people simply because they have always evolved in the same linguistic environment. Some Germans as well as most of representatives of the previously mentioned nations will find it easy, unlike Poles or, say, Spaniards, to travel regularly to their home countries. However, more importantly, the nationals of the new 10 East-and-Central European Member States might be perceived differently by the local people from the Western Europeans, as they might often be associated with a cheap and sometimes troublesome workforce. This specificity may affect their relations with the Belgians, other EU officials and, indirectly, other fellow nationals. In fact, as originating from Post-communist Europe, the Poles may be regarded both by the local population and civil servants from the "old" Member States as a different category of EU officials. According to Triandafyllidou (2002, in Spohn and Triandafyllidou, 2003: 7) "Central and Eastern Europeans are perceived [by the "old" Member States] as distant brethren or indeed as distant aliens". The understanding of their history and attitudes is lower than in the case of other European nations, closely linked to Belgium throughout the ages, and their recent experience is radically different (Communist totalitarianism, economic, political and cultural transformation). For these reasons, the EU officials from that

also worth mentioning: Siewiera, 1995; Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001a, 2001b, 2005; Mostowska, 2009.

part of Europe may sometimes feel alienated also within the European Institutions environment.

The present study focuses on one national category of EU Institutions officials, namely on those coming from Poland, a “new” Member State, and aims at contributing to the analysis of their adaptation and socialization patterns in Brussels. It should be mentioned that, in addition to the particular perception of all “new” Member States nationals, a number of stereotypes, such as anticipated very strong attachment to Catholicism and the Church or strong inclinations to heavy drinking, concern Poles specifically. Polish people are also, by far, the most numerous group of Central- and Eastern Europeans in Brussels and have been present there for quite a long time. Therefore, they are certainly subject to much stronger emotions and stereotypes than e.g. Czechs or Slovenians.

The present study aims to examine whether the process of social and physical encapsulation in a work-related environment can be noticed among the Polish EU officials and, if this is the case, to what extent it is influenced by factors related to their origin.

The analysis refers to the concept of *engrenage* (Shore, 2000; Abélès, 2000), the phenomenon of the progressive enclosure of EU employees in the work environment, related to their identification with the EU Institutions. Indeed, the “Eurocrats”,³ as they are popularly called, work on the realization of the project of united Europe. They represent a common European interest that sometimes stands above direct national interest (Bellier, 2000b: 65) and might be in opposition to the latter. Physical and social isolation (or even perceived exclusion and stigmatisation) of these expatriate professionals, coupled with general adherence to integrationist ideas, may lead to emotional and ideological identification with the European Institutions and consequently contribute to the process of construction of the separate community of EU officials.

The article consists of five parts. First, the research methodology is briefly presented. Next, it reviews the existing literature relevant to the process of social and physical encapsulation, and *engrenage* of the EU officials, drawing a theoretical framework of the research. Then, the findings are discussed and summarized, as regards, firstly, the alienation of the analysed community and secondly, their enclosure through networking activity. The paper concludes with a discussion.

³ A term composed of two words “European” and “bureaucrat” (Bellier, 2002: 84) “that is often used pejoratively to refer to the agents of the European Commission and other EU institutions.” (Bellier and Wilson, 2000: 17).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THE PROFILE OF THE FOCUS GROUP

Results presented in this article are the outcome of more extensive research on the Polish community of EU officials in Brussels, conducted between 2008 and 2010, in the context of which the mechanism of encapsulation of the Polish EU officials in Belgium and their process of adaptation were investigated.

The study combined different qualitative methods, such as: semi-structured questionnaires; semi-structured in-depth interviews; participant observation; and analysis of literature and excerpts from an open Internet forum⁴ created by the Polish EU officials.

As my respondents preferred to remain anonymous, I refrained from indicating their names, DGs or hierarchical grades.⁵

My study covered only statutory officials, temporary officials and contractual agents, while it excluded such categories as: *stagiaires*, *interimaires* or Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and MEP assistants. This choice was motivated by the fact that the employment contracts of representatives of the first two groups are too short or too precarious to enable development of close links with the Institutions or with the community of Polish EU officials, while the MEPs and their assistants are not really employed by the Institutions and hold either a political mandate or have been selected for political reasons and hence do not have the same experience and interests as the EU officials.

Given the elitist character of the target population, and, therefore, the limited access, the research sample consisted of 30 Polish EU civil servants (19 women and 11 men) employed in the European Union Institutions in Brussels.⁶ In addition, I was in continuous contact with some other individuals working in, or connected to, the EU Institutions, who were also an important source of information.

I contacted my respondents via an internal mailing list that is open exclusively to Polish EU officials, and which numbers approximately 1000 users. A person working in the European Commission and being a member of this list enabled the access.

I distributed written semi-structured questionnaires consisting largely of open-ended questions. The questionnaires were prepared in English as it was the working language of all of my respondents. The questions were divided in several theme

⁴ The forum of *Gazeta Wyborcza* called *Europracownicy* (eng. Euro-employees).

⁵ After each quotation, I gave only the gender and age of my interviewees.

⁶ The European Commission, the European Parliament and the EU Council.

clusters (e.g. social relations, adaptation in a new environment, contact with home and host country, daily life, etc.)

After obtaining responses to the questionnaires from 30 respondents, I chose ten⁷ of them and conducted oral, semi-structured-in-depth interviews. I met each of the interviewees (one per section) face to face and only once. All but four interviews were conducted in English.⁸ The interviews were recorded (with the permission of the interviewees) and only subsequently transcribed.

Interviews, lasting on average one hour each, were conducted mostly during the lunch breaks in public spaces in proximity to the offices, such as: cafés at the Luxembourg Square, or the cafeteria in the Commission's headquarters, Berlaymont's Café. Some respondents preferred to meet after working hours, in pubs. One interview was conducted at my home and one at the respondent's home.

Furthermore, I completed my research with participant observation in more ordinary situations, notably during various social events (i.e. I attended the monthly meetings of Polish EU officials in one of Brussels' Irish pubs in the Schuman area, but also participated in several home parties or cultural events that gathered Polish people).

The qualitative character of this anthropological research entailed, however, certain limitations with regard to the possibility of generalizing findings.

As to the profile of the research group, the great majority of the respondents were employed on a permanent basis and originated from big cities.⁹ Some respondents had moved to Belgium directly from other Western EU countries.

All of the participants had completed University studies. The majority of them studied or worked abroad prior to employment in the EU Institutions (from 6 months to 13 years).¹⁰ This seems to confirm Ban's observations (2009: 6) according to which, the officials from the "new" Member States entering the EU Institutions shortly after enlargement were typically very well and often internationally educated or had previous experience of working abroad.

⁷ I divided the original group into groups on the basis of the specific types of relations they had established in Belgium, notably their attitude toward the local population, their own group of Polish EU officials but also other international expats. The respondents selected for interviews included representatives of each of these categories. Another important criterion was the degree of adaptation in Brussels.

⁸ Four respondents preferred to speak Polish. Some of them pointed out an artificial distance that would otherwise be created while responding in English, while the others insisted on Polish as the language of the interview (their working language was either French or German).

⁹ Only four of the 30 persons were born in cities below 300,000, and only two originated from towns smaller than 10,000 inhabitants.

¹⁰ Similarly, a study by Hooghe (2001: 170) conducted on top Commission officials showed that nearly half studied or worked abroad prior to their employment in the EU Institutions.

Most of the research participants lived in Belgium with partners, while only a few had children.

As Ban (2009: 6) observed, although the EU officials from “new” Member States had “excellent language skills” and had often mastered several foreign languages, only a few of them knew French upon arrival in Brussels. Similarly, the Polish EU officials, while mastering several foreign languages, often did not know French at the beginning of their stay in Belgium.

The mobility of the Polish EU officials resulted clearly from “pull factors” (Castles and Miller, 2003: 22) related to higher income, professional development and job security. For some of them, “idealistic” motivation to work for the common good (European integration) was at the basis of their mobility. Among non-professional reasons, the ideas of changing lifestyle or staying in an international environment were recurrent. Joining a foreign partner was indicated as a frequent reason amongst women who had moved to Belgium many years before the accession.

Most of the Polish “Eurocrats” declared that employment in the EU Institutions was long-planned and their education path and early career had been oriented toward achievement of this goal.

The respondents could be roughly divided into three categories with regard to the duration of their stay in Belgium: (1) the newcomers; (2) officials with more or less significant Belgian experience, most of whom had probably come to live in Belgium because they were offered a position in an EU Institution; and (3) “old immigrants-turned-officials” - people who had lived in Belgium before the accession and even before institutional preparations for the accession.

Interestingly, despite being granted life-long employment, only a minority of the respondents was convinced of staying permanently in Belgium. Moreover, many of those who did not plan to leave, had lived in Belgium prior to employment in the EU Institutions and their preference to stay was related rather to their private than professional life.¹¹

¹¹ This is concurrent with a study on British EU officials (Cailliez, 2004: 58), according to which the majority of investigated EU officials did not consider staying in Belgium once retired.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Context: different categories of Polish migrants in Belgium

The Polish community in Belgium is quite composite, as it consists of such diverse categories of migrants as i.e. former soldiers of general Maczek's army,¹² political refugees from Communist Poland, economic migrants from the Podlasie region, but also recent EU Institutions staff and employees of EU-matters-related organizations and undertakings, such as NGOs, law firms, lobbyists, and diplomatic representations of various levels.

Although the relation between the EU Institutions employees and other Polish communities is important for the present research, I will abstain from recalling the history of Polish immigration to Belgium. It is sufficient to emphasize that, although some previous waves of Polish immigration took place before the Second World War and in the time of Communism, a more important number of migrants appeared in Belgium after the collapse of the system in 1989. The main region of origin of this more recent wave of migrants was Podlasie, situated in North-Eastern Poland (Siewiera, 1995; Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001b). At the end of the 1990s, the group of the undocumented Polish migrants from this region numbered as many as 30 to 50 thousand¹³ (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001b: 6, 2005: 676).

The great majority of these illegal, economic migrants originated from poverty-stricken, rural or small-town areas characterized by a lack of job opportunities (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001b: 7; Siewiera, 1995: 74). The reasons of their migration were purely and directly economic: to earn money on the "black" labour market in Belgium in order to invest it in Poland (Siewiera, 1995: 74).

Most of them were poorly educated, often without any job qualifications or knowledge of the local languages (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001a: 8). Consequently, they could only perform illegal, simple, manual jobs, mainly cleaning works or jobs in the construction sector (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001b: 15).

Taking into account their lifestyle, objectives and attitudes, this group of Polish migrants can be described as "incomplete migrants" (Okólski, 2006: 11; Grabowska-Lusińska and Okólski, 2009; Salt, Clarke and Wanner, 2004), a category applied to

¹² After WWII, Belgium hosted soldiers from the 1st Armoured Division of General Maczek, who took part in liberation of Flemish provinces in 1945 and founded their own families there (Goddeeris, 2005: 7). Although, as Goddeeris (2005: 43) stresses, it is difficult to estimate their exact number, they numbered no more than several hundred.

¹³ According to Professor Johan Leman, the community of Polish undocumented migrants numbered 15 thousand persons in Brussels and 30 thousand in Belgium (cited in: Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001a: 6). 20-25 thousand of the latter number were settled in Brussels (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001a).

labour migrants from Central and Eastern Europe during the time of transition to the market economy. As Okólski (2006: 11) explains, this type of migrants “are usually poorly skilled; they live in the countryside and small towns or belong to marginalized groups in larger towns. They are attracted by higher pay abroad than in the home country, not just because it is higher but principally because the bulk of earnings is being sent home where the cost of living is much lower”. The “incomplete migrants” do not bring their families and tend to stay on the margins of the host society, mainly because of the temporary nature of their occupations (Grabowska-Lusińska and Okólski, 2009: 40).

In line with a general observation made by Okólski (2006: 11) on “incomplete migrants” developing specific ethnic niches on local commodities and labour markets, the Poles have dominated certain segments of the informal labour market in Belgium, mainly in cleaning works, construction and renovation sectors (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001b: 15).

As Siewiera (1995: 72) emphasizes, being clandestine meant living on the margins of the society, job and accommodation insecurity and constant fear of expulsion for these Poles. Typically, they inhabited poor and dangerous districts of Brussels (Siewiera, 1995: 95).

Although they lived abroad, they were completely immersed in the Polish realm. They lived with other Poles in overpopulated flats, spoke only their mother tongue, read the Polish press, watched Polish television, and cooked Polish dishes (Siewiera, 1995: 95). They also used services of preponderantly Polish service providers and spent their spare time in a Polish environment (Siewiera, 1995: 97–98). As Grzymała-Kazłowska (2001b: 29, 2005: 684) puts it, these people brought to Belgium their own traditions, their own ways of spending free time and festivities and in a way, they brought “a little Poland” to Belgium.

At the same time, the external world (Belgian society) was perceived by these migrants as a universe of work, and unfamiliar culture (Siewiera, 1995: 96). Their contacts with the local population were limited to the strictly necessary (e.g. with employers and landlords) (Siewiera, 1995: 86, 89).

Although, at the beginning, cooperation within the Polish community was quite intensive, progressively it was replaced by fierce competition, while mutual assistance and support were offered only within the bounds of family networks (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2005: 690–691).

The accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004 has triggered a completely new wave of Polish immigration to Belgium, involving highly skilled professionals who, after passing the EU Institutions entry competitions, found employ-

ment in the European Institutions.¹⁴ According to the data available at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, 2321 Polish people work in the EU Institutions (1426 persons in the EU Commission; 301 in the EU Parliament), while 285 persons found employment in EU agencies. Roughly half of them have been recruited as permanent officials (Ministerstwo spraw zagranicznych, 2010).

The way of life of the Polish “EU” community is substantially different from the lifestyle of the “old Polish immigration” to Belgium. Unlike most of the other Polish migrants in Belgium, the “wave” of Polish “EPSO laureates”¹⁵ can be described as an example of “positive immigration” (see Gatti, 2009) of urban elites.

The Polish EU officials belong to a larger category of Brussels’ expatriates, who differ from the common migrants with their usually high level of qualifications and elevated professional and economic status. Contrary to “ordinary” migrants, their mobility is not triggered by necessity to satisfy basic needs, but by a variety of professional reasons, not necessarily of a directly economic nature, such as the opportunity for new professional experience.

Nevertheless, the EU officials are not typical expats. In most cases, expats stay in Brussels for a short time, while the EU officials usually settle there for as long as the statutory officials are granted life-long employment, while contractual agents and temporary officials – have renewable fixed-term contracts. Undoubtedly, the perspective of a life-long stay in Belgium together with the privileges and rights granted, should influence their integration and make it different from integration patterns both of ordinary expats and common migrants.

The specificity of the Polish EU officials is related *inter alia* to the fact that most of them are moving from a more or less mono-cultural society into a culturally diversified one. Some of the factors impeding their adaptation can be considered typically Polish or East European. These are, notably, the perception of other categories of Polish immigrants by Belgians or the stereotypes on Eastern Europeans of the latter and, on the other hand, growing alienation from the other Polish communities in Belgium.

3.2 Engrenage in the “Eurocratic” reality

Both Shore (2000: 161), and Bellier (2002: 78) draw attention to the phenomenon of “ghettoisation” of “Eurocrats” and other expats in residential districts of

¹⁴ The first Polish auxiliary agents came to Belgium as early as in 2003.

¹⁵ EPSO (European Personnel Selection Office) is a department (Directorate General, DG) of the European Commission responsible for organization of entry competition exams to the institutions, while an “EPSO laureate” is a person who has successfully passed the competition and has been entered on a “reserve list” of candidates for recruitment.

Brussels (see also Cailliez, 2004). As these authors observe, these categories of privileged “migrants” live and work in a kind of a “diplomatic bubble” where everyday contacts with the local population are limited to bureaucratic or commercial transactions, and therefore, the EU institutions are their principal social environment. The aforementioned “ghettoisation” is related to the fact that the Directorate General is the first place of socialization of a newcomer, as EU officials naturally seek information about good places to live from other officials, who obviously propose areas where they live or where their colleagues live.

Such theorists of EU Institutions as Shore (2000) or Abélès (2000) refer to a specific process of *engrenage* (or “enmeshing”), understood as “a mechanism of institutional and ideological incorporation” (Shore, 2000: 148). This mechanism favours “a strong sense of community” (Shore, 2000: 131), or a kind of “corporate identity” (Shore, 2000: 140) amongst the EU employees, emphasized by a number of external signs and symbols constituting distinctive markers of their exclusive status (*inter alia* “badges” which enable access to the EU Institutions buildings and *cantines*, special ID cards and number plates). The “Eurocrats” have developed characteristic *jargon*¹⁶ (Bellier, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Shore, 2000; Abélès, 2000; Abélès, Bellier and McDonald, 2010; Neveu, 2000), a common lifestyle and specific rituals. Certainly, some could argue that this kind of “professional identity” is likely to appear in any workplace: most urban professionals wear suits and badges, spend time together after work or develop some kind of professional slang. However, in the case of EU officials, this “corporate identity” is associated with a specifically European, institution-related mentality and loyalty. Indeed, their common task is to foster a common European interest and thus they are required to abandon (to a certain extent) their national loyalties, and to neutralise differences. Emotional links with the state of origin are diluted¹⁷ and are not replaced by identification with Belgium (Bellier, 2002: 79). As Bellier (2002: 81) states, there is a moral obligation for the EU officials “to prioritize the ‘European-ness’”. Certainly, national identities do not disappear completely. In consequence, the “Eurocrats” share “the sense of being ‘different’ from other Europeans, no longer ‘rooted’ in one’s native homeland, and part of a European vanguard” (Shore, 2000: 140).

Such identification will naturally add to other identifications (national, regional, religious, etc.) without necessarily taking precedence over them. In fact, the EU

¹⁶ “Franglais” or “Frenghish”, in which “certain words or expressions are rarely translated, and syntax can appear to combine elements culled from both [French and English] languages - or from others” (Abélès, Bellier and McDonald, 2010: 32; see also Ban, 2007).

¹⁷ However, national inclinations are apparently still noticeable in the “Eurocratic” lifestyles. Abélès observes that contacts with other cultures may actually exacerbate national barriers instead of producing a common identity (Shore and Abélès, 2004: 10). Elsewhere, he suggests that still existing national identities may even be encouraged by certain aspects of the EU Institutions’ recruitment and promotion systems (Abélès, 2004: 16).

civil servants in Brussels are believed to have multiple identities, namely the European one, the expatriate identity, and the collective, work-related identity (Bellier, 2002: 91). However, the multinational pattern of EU officials, the specificity of their mission (serving interests explicitly distinct from the national interests) and the particularities of their lifestyle and ideological beliefs strengthen the meaning of these distinctive features and may strongly influence their social contacts. The specificity of their situation related notably to a multi-national and multi-lingual environment, privileges they enjoy, experiences they share, their status and “continuous exposure to institutional norms and practices”, not only estrange them from the local society, but also have strong influence on the creation of European identity and a strong feeling of solidarity amongst the EU staff (Shore, 2000: 140).

Shore compares new EU officials to neophytes that undergo a *rite de passage* and “must first be separated and stripped of their former identities before they can become fully incorporated into their new status and identity” (2000: 166).

In the following sections I will verify whether and how some of these general findings apply to the Polish EU community: thus, whether “traditional” drivers of encapsulation, allegedly common to all EU officials as described in the previous literature, are present in the case of Polish EU officials. Subsequently, I will analyse some specifically Polish factors, and notably the encapsulating role of social networking.

4. ALIENATION FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES

4.1. Separation in space

In contrast to “old” Member States “Eurocrats”, Polish EU officials do not tend to settle in expensive residential districts of South-Eastern Brussels (see: Cailliez, 2004; Bellier, 2002; Shore, 2000). In fact, only a few of Polish respondents chose to live in one of these municipalities.¹⁸ While interpreting this trend, one must take into account, in addition to possible specificity of motivations of Polish EU officials, the recent revitalization and resulting gentrification of certain poorer and previously less attractive quarters.

Not surprisingly, the inhabitants of the aforementioned “posh” districts, quoted such reasons for settling there as: “security”, “calmness” and “green areas”. Besides, the residential boroughs (also outside Brussels) were chosen because of “the

¹⁸ As Cailliez observed, the accommodation choices of British EU officials followed familial developments. Young and single people tended to settle in central locations with access to night-life and restaurants. Once changing their civil status and having children, they were moving to green and peripheral neighbourhoods adapted to families with children (Cailliez, 2004: 33).

proximity of the kindergartens”, or “good schools”. The under-representation of the traditionally “Eurocratic” districts among the preferred settlement areas of the responding Polish EU officials might be linked to the fact that most of Polish “Eurocrats” are young and relatively low-graded and thus their purchasing power is lower than the average of the EU-officials.¹⁹ This could also be due to the fact that the real estate prices in these municipalities have risen substantially over the last ten years.

Interestingly, even those EU officials who cherished the quiet life in a green, well-off district were obliged to look in other neighbourhoods. In such cases, the affordable price of real estate was the reason of choosing such districts. Overall, proximity to the office was most often determinant for the accommodation choice.²⁰ The Polish respondents had an inclination, rather uncommon amongst the “old” officials, to choose one of the least safe neighbourhoods, which had apparently become a typical “newcomers harbour”, where people tended to rent flats for shorter periods in order to have time to look around.

The Polish EU civil servants quite often chose accommodation outside Brussels, mostly in Brabant. What is interesting is that those living in Francophone territory quoted the language as an important factor at the basis of their choice. Other reasons for selection of these locations were notably “nice and relatively cheap housing”, “very green and safe area”, or “good connections with Brussels”.

An important number of EU officials declared staying in lively, trendy municipalities in Brussels. The reasons for selection of these boroughs were similar, although the differences between their levels of wealth were substantial. Indeed, these neighbourhoods were perceived as fashionable places with intensive social life and well-developed leisure facilities and were in most cases popular amongst the younger generation of Polish “Eurocrats”.

Thus, can it be concluded on the basis of the abovementioned findings that the EU officials are geographically integrated into Belgian society? Despite certain dispersion and change of profile of the most often selected quarters, such a conclusion does not appear justified. Indeed, the majority of the interviewed Polish EU civil servants tended to settle down in visibly international areas inhabited by other expats, although these were not the residential districts in which the more established EU officials tended to live. In fact, the majority of the interviewees admitted living in a rather heterogenic environment, where Belgian population was not particularly dominant:

¹⁹ This would be in line with the results of a study by Cailliez (2004), who observed that the British officials who purchased properties in other than the popular South-Eastern areas, were low grade and did not have means to purchase houses in the residential districts popular amongst the expats.

²⁰ The proximity to the office was seen as important factor in choosing settlement (especially upon arrival) by the British EU officials studied by Cailliez (2004: 34–35).

(...) as to the nationality, the profile is quite broad, there are not too many Belgians I guess, maybe 20%, the environment is very international. There are many people from the Institutions, but not exclusively, so this is not necessarily the group from the Commission or the Parliament (male, 30).

On the whole, the Polish EU officials do not seem to be as “ghettoized” as their “old” colleagues in the elegant quarters with a high percentage of other “Eurocrats”. Nevertheless, they still seem to be choosing neighbourhoods inhabited by other foreigners. What is also worth stressing, they do not seem to be looking for the environs inhabited by other Poles.

4.2. Embeddedness in the working environment: the “EU institutional bubble”

The EU officials are said to “typically live in an expatriate network which is parallel world with its own shared values, problems, concerns and conversation topics” (De Gruyter, 2006: 12, in Suvarierol, 2009: 425) and their social life is often considered as limited to the work-related group (Shore, 2000; Bellier, 2002). Or so goes the theory, developed on the basis of observation of “old” EU “Eurocrats” in the past.

Even though my respondents seem to have escaped “ghettoisation” in space, many of them indeed appeared not to have intensive contacts with the “outside world” due to their life-style patterns. Some of the interviewees clearly declared their social life was not very elaborated as a result of strict time limitations and fatigue after work. Certainly, long working hours do not leave much time for social activities. As they did not have many opportunities to mingle with “outsiders”, their non-professional contacts were also restricted to work colleagues. One of them said:

[My] social life is shrinking since I joined the EU Institutions. It is simply because of it. It is rather linked to the fact I am at the beginning and I simply work too much (female, 32).

Certain patterns of making new acquaintances could be identified. Cailliez (2004: 81) suggests that the EU Institutions play a highly important role in establishing new social relations. Apparently, the exclusive circles in which the EU officials evolve may even have roots in a period pre-dating the recruitment. As Suvarierol (2009: 421) observes, “The College of Europe in Bruges does not only educate young ambitious European minds but also provides an opportunity to form close friendships and lay foundations of a multinational Brussels network for many prospective EU officials”. Indeed, some of the Polish “Eurocrats” had met their

friends during their studies (also abroad) or specifically at the College of Europe in Natolin or Bruges:

(...) At least my friends, and I mean two friends, are mostly those with whom I was studying in one particular [European] school - Natolin College of Europe, not because it makes them very special but we've spent very intensive years of studying together and this is something that has made us really friends (female, 32).

As it seems, the Polish EU officials make friends predominantly within their professional group. Clearly, friends of the responding Polish “Eurocrats” were most frequently other EU officials. However, some of them admitted also to having as friends other foreigners not employed in the EU Institutions. By contrast, other Polish migrants (outside of the Institutions) were the least popular group, even less popular than Belgians (both EU officials and Belgians not employed in the EU Institutions).

4.3. Perception of the host country and adaptation patterns

In comparison with the abovementioned Polish immigrants from Podlasie, the Polish EU officials have many features pre-disposing them, theoretically, to become champions of integration. Indeed, they usually are well educated and well off, they are often multilingual and familiarized with “otherness”, as they meet people of dozens of nationalities every day at work, and they often have had previous experience abroad. Moreover, their mobility is triggered clearly by “pull factors” facilitating adaptation. However, in the light of the present research, this does not seem to be the case.

Polish “Eurocrats” declared they did not feel homesickness. On the other hand, almost all of the respondents travel to Poland at least once a year,²¹ missing their friends and family, while many also miss: Polish cuisine, traditional celebrations or language. Most of them maintain intensive contacts with relatives and friends in Poland, either *via* Internet or telephone and spend traditional festivities in Poland. However, their answers and stories revealed a certain openness to other communities and lifestyles and a lack of attachment to the typically Polish way of life.

Interestingly, the great majority of respondents did not find it difficult to adapt to the local culture. However, this can be explained by the fact that many of them

²¹ Those, who travel most often, are separated from their partners remaining in Poland. Although the intensity of visits is slightly less important among those who had stayed in Brussels three years or more, the co-relation is not very strong and one may presume that the frequency of flights to Poland is related rather to the personal and family situation, or simply to the attitude of a “Eurocrat” towards her/his new life in Brussels.

regarded the local culture as actually international (“a European blend of cultures” or “international mix”) and not as something purely Belgian. This would mean that they in fact adapted to other expats:

It is difficult to adapt, as I cannot find real local culture, what are the “symptoms of being Belgian”? It’s much easier to integrate with other immigrants in Brussels than with local people (female, 26).

This kind of adaptation is relatively easy as the margin of tolerance is high, and required adaptation is limited to the respect of a superficial informal code of conduct in a multi-cultural environment.

Favell (2001: 47) remarks that, in case of expatriates in Brussels, “integration” does not necessarily mean integration with the Belgians. Firstly, the local society is not uniform: there are at least two different communities (Flemish and Francophone), which are not fully integrated with each other (Favell, 2001). Secondly, he describes Brussels as “a truly international, multicultural city” and claims that one can be considered integrated into the city’s life without having much contact with the autochthonous population (Favell, 2001). In fact, he argues that, in Brussels, it is pointless to consider non-autochthonous groups as an external element which are supposed to integrate with the Belgians, while he considers them, in a way, as fractions of “fully-fledged” local population (Favell, 2001). As he sums up, “Brussels is arguably unique in being a city where cultures flourish in an atmosphere largely free of the assimilative ‘national’ pressures (...)” (Favell, 2001: 4).

Similarly, also Cailliez (2004: 13) suggests that it is pointless to speak about integration of highly skilled migrants in Brussels, as they simply “do not aspire to change their cultural models and they defend their position of the privileged foreigners” [author’s translation].

Nonetheless, an important number of the research participants found adaptation difficult,²² while many persons were not able to “grasp the definition of the ‘local culture’” (male, 37) or even distinguish it in the cosmopolitan, multicultural *imbroglio*. Someone remarked that the strongly cosmopolitan character of certain neighbourhoods actually impedes integration with the local population. In fact, being an EU civil servant apparently was not a factor facilitating adaptation.

Some others found Belgium just like “every foreign country” or not very different in terms of values in comparison with Poland. There were also those who were unable to “understand the mentality of (...) neighbours, shop keepers or public officials” (male, 32).

²² Possibly those who were more oriented towards in-depth adaptation to the local, Belgian culture and lifestyle.

Certain responses revealed nostalgic idealization of one's own country and culture: "I miss Polish cheerfulness, open homes" (female, 30).

Finally, some respondents pointed to their previous experience of living abroad as a factor facilitating their adaptation in Belgium.

Amongst the aspects that the Polish "Eurocrats" found difficult to adapt to, the poor quality of services recurred:

What I found difficult was public administration and services that are not efficient enough (Belgacom, Electrabel etc.), they are very slow and don't really care whether consumers are happy about the service or not. For me, typically Belgian attitude is "this is how it is and I can't do anything about it" (...) (female, 27).

Even a woman, who had been living in Brussels for over 14 years, still could not accept their poor quality:

They are very bad in services. It's a nightmare, really a nightmare. (...) For a Pole, it is a cultural shock; in our country it is completely different! You could be fired for things, which are completely common here (female, 41).

However, the perception of the local people was not always negative. Asked whether they think that the Poles in general and they specifically could learn something from the host society, many respondents answered affirmatively. The Polish EU officials usually appreciated Belgian tolerance, the relaxed and easygoing attitude, modesty, sense of compromise, and ecologic consciousness or solidarity.

4.4. Alienation from the host society

Contacts with the host society appear as one of the most challenging aspects of living in Belgium. Only very few of my respondents maintained social relations with Belgians, while the majority of them socialized mostly with other EU employees, especially with other Poles or other foreigners. One of the male, high-grade respondents elaborated:

There is no integration with the Belgian society here and probably, there will not be ever any integration, because, as EU officials do not have any contact with the Belgian society. We have contact with an international mixture, both work-related and social. Probably, there will be some elements, like for instance learning the local language, but it cannot be identified with integration with the Belgian society as such. The reason for it is firstly linked to the fact that we have no reasons and no occasions to meet. Secondly, the Belgian society is not open to other nationalities (male, 47).

One of the informants explained the reasons for this situation in the following manner:

Clearly, we live in a ghetto. The Belgians seem to like it that way and the Commission does little or nothing to foster integration. Then, we don't have much time after work anyhow (male, 35).

There may be at least three main reasons explaining this situation: alienation typical for every newcomer, the specific lifestyle of the “Commission people” and the lack of openness of the hosts.²³

One of the notorious problems of the newcomers, strongly hindering their integration, is their inability to communicate in French:

I don't speak good French because the Commission had other language priorities for me, disregarding my (and other officials') needs related to social life here, which is a serious mistake (male, 35).

In addition to this, even those newcomers who master one of the local languages experience problems in penetrating into the closed communities of friends that the local people have built throughout their teenage and adult lives. These problems are obvious and are not specifically related to the status of “Eurocrats” or to the particularity of the host country.

As to the specific lifestyle, many respondents explained that they did not have opportunities to meet Belgians, as most of their time evolves in the EU Institutions' environment:

We don't meet them. Foreigners at work, foreign neighbours, I'm confronted with foreigners for 90% of my time. Nothing against the Belgians, they are just rare in my environment (female, 32).

The following testimony seems to constitute a good illustration of this phenomenon:

The sports that I have are mainly with Poles because I play in a Polish, almost Polish team. The other activities that I have are either related to my job, to my office. The people from my office are mostly of other nationalities. They are either Belgians, or German, I know also some people from the “new” Member States, so it is mixed, so I cannot say any specific nationality. They are from the Institutions. Those that I meet while doing sport activities are also mainly from the European Institutions, but there are also people from the outside. Sometimes I have occasion to meet people informally that I meet during my official visits,

²³ Similarly, the British officials studied by Cailliez (2004: 8) found Belgians mostly “closed and difficult to meet”. Cailliez (2004: 24) explains that the alleged lack of the openness of the host society may be related to the fact that they perceive the EU officials just as other expats, as people “in transit”, and this discourages them from establishing any social networks.

like the lobbyists, the representatives of the national or international organizations, other than European Institutions. (...) (male, 47).

Respondents complained, “there are few places where you can meet Belgians. If you do meet them, they tend to ignore you” (male, 32). One of the Polish EU civil servant stated that “[Belgians] may look at you as at an ‘EU official’ i.e. another category”. She explained:

(...) working in the EU environment, we definitely stick more to friends from work (...), we study languages at the Commission courses, we go to parties where other EU officials go, which makes it difficult to integrate with the locals. One needs to make a real effort to integrate with locals unless the partner is a Belgian that would introduce you to his friends (locals) (female, 30).

Thus, being an EU official was perceived as an important obstacle to contacts with the host society:

Yes I do [find it difficult to adapt to the local culture], although I must admit I do not make an effort to adapt. Working long hours in the office, meeting mainly expats, not knowing French very well, I do not feel integrated here; I do not meet Belgian people (female, 29).

Some people suggested that integration would have been easier if they had been students. Certainly, in adult life, there are far fewer opportunities to create stronger ties with new people and the status of immigrant, coupled with strong encapsulation in the work-related environment, only makes things worse. As the following testimony shows, if the Polish officials did have friends from the outside the “EU-bubble”, these were in most cases friendships established thanks to their partners not employed in the EU Institutions:

(...) Okay, most people that I know I guess are still Polish, but I now become friends with other nationalities too because of my partner. I met a lot of people working outside the EU Institutions - very, very different nationalities, also outside the European Union (...) (male, 30).

A few indicated acquaintances introduced through Polish relatives living in Belgium for long time. Having a hobby was another means to make new friendships with people from outside of the “Eurocratic bubble”.

Another factor impeding contacts of the Polish EU officials with the local people is related to the perception of the Belgian society, allegedly showing little interest in meeting foreigners. The Belgian world is perceived as inaccessible to foreigners. Some respondents went further and qualified the receiving society as “superstitious about other nationalities including Poles” (male, 47), or even xenophobic. Some research participants believed that Belgians simply do not like “Eurocrats”:

Belgians seem quite hostile to the people working at the Commission, thinking we are causing price increase because of our purchasing power (...) that we earn far too much and that we are lazy and arrogant (female, 27).

Belgians were regarded as being “mostly unfriendly, self-centred people” (male, 37). The negative characteristics were ascribed both to the Flemish and the Walloons. The Flemish people were found “very reserved”, which according to one of the respondents make normal social contacts impossible (female, 30). As one of the respondents observed, Walloons “tend to be xenophobic towards foreigners, especially if one doesn’t have good French. Being an EU official only makes matters worse, unless you happen to be buying a car, of course” (male, 35).

In addition to how the Polish EU-officials are actually seen by the outside world, their integrative capacity very much depends on what they think this perception of the other is. The quality of being a “Eurocrat” does not take them out of the reach of the stereotypes on their nationality, whereas they also become subject to stereotypes in the professional group to which they belong. Still, while roughly a half of the researched group found the attitude of the Belgians towards the EU officials to be negative, the attitude of the Belgians towards Poles was more often found to be neutral or even positive. This perception was similar in the group of economic migrants who did not feel discriminated by the local population and, similarly, found the attitude of the Belgians as either positive or neutral (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001b: 36). However, when asked to imagine what a Belgian neighbour would say about them, the majority of the interviewed officials anticipated very negative reactions, in sharp contrast with their hope that they would be generally perceived positively, at least as Poles. Some respondents seem to believe that the opinion of the local people would always be strongly influenced by traditional stereotypes the Belgians may have on the inhabitants of Eastern Europe and specifically on the Poles (concerning mainly illegal builders and cleaning ladies). Thus, the Polish “Eurocrats” may expect that the Belgians will perceive them in their double role – as rich and privileged EU officials and, at the same time, as representatives of a poor, backward, violent and sometimes criminal immigrant community. The stereotypes on Poles are mostly not very flattering. Polish EU officials find it humiliating to be immediately associated with the cheap Polish workforce, regarded mostly as heavy drinking physical workers, greedy for social benefits. Even those who approach the issue with humour, do not seem to feel at ease. Indeed, the “other” Poles are much more visible in Brussels than the “Eurocrats” and it is obvious that they will keep shaping Belgian perception of the Poles as a nation. Although the opinions about Polish plumbers and cleaning ladies are mostly positive, these compliments can easily sound a bit condescending.

As a matter of fact, these projections may not be totally false. Indeed, several Belgians (mostly educated EU officials) interviewed²⁴ on their perception of Poland and on the perception of Poland by Belgian society, gave a picture of an extremely religious, Eurosceptic and backward nation of hard working plumbers, cleaning ladies and construction workers. Less flattering opinions referred to criminality, nationalistic attitudes and even the mafia.

Even these respondents who did not perceive making Belgian friends as a significant difficulty, suggested that “the relations are not as close as with the Polish people met here” (female, 33), or simply that: “making friends with EC people is easier” (male, 37). Moreover, many of the informants pointed out that it was easier to make friends with compatriots, especially within the EU Institutions context.

Overall, it can be concluded that Polish EU officials did not have too many Belgian friends and their contacts were not very intensive. This appears to be in line with the study of Suvarierol (2009: 425) according to which the officials who have any ties with Belgians are a minority (see also Cailliez, 2004).

Instead, the Polish EU civil servants seem to be embedded in their own work environment related acquaintances, either Polish or foreign. This may be explained with the observation made by Cailliez (2004: 24) according to which, foreigners tend to establish social networks in the receiving country with people similar to themselves, especially at the beginning of their stay. Also Barbichon (1996, in Cailliez, 2004: 23) observes that wealthier migrants (*les migrants aisés*) are only “relatively isolated”, as in spite of their alienation from the host society, they may keep up very intensive social networks with people similar to them. This “relative isolation” may be linked to a specific infrastructure reserved for expatriates, such as International Schools, kindergartens, and sport or cultural centres (Barbichon, 1996, in Cailliez, 2004). This reasoning might also apply to the EU officials who enjoy these kinds of facilities at the Institutions.

4.5. Alienation from the local Polish non-EU community

According to Grzymała-Kazłowska (2001b: 9), already in pre-accession times, the Poles who lived legally in Belgium publicly distanced themselves from those who stayed temporarily in Belgium and performed illegal jobs. They emphasized their difference, openly criticized their undocumented compatriots and avoided contacts (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001b).

Similarly, the Polish EU officials do not really mingle with “other” Poles in Belgium. It seems that many of the Polish EU officials are convinced that the Belgians

²⁴ On the basis of responses received to the semi-structured questionnaire distributed among Belgian EU officials concerning *inter alia* the association with Poles and Poland.

are often looking at all Poles through the prism of stereotypes developed on the basis of contacts with previous categories of Polish migrants, hence their judgments are often emotional. However, Polish low-skilled economic migrants and Polish EU officials seem to be two separate communities in Brussels. The vast majority maintains social relations with compatriots, but only with those of a similar social background and level of education. Nevertheless, their opinions and judgments regarding the “other Poles” are diversified: from reluctance and even disdain to appreciation and sympathy. Many respondents shared the opinion on the heterogeneity of Polish workers in Brussels.

One of the female old comers gave a quite elaborated insight into the reality of the Polish migration to Belgium:

These are various people, a very heterogenic group. For a long time, there were two groups. There were people from the old immigration, from the intelligentsia. These people had often experienced some terrible tragedy, as they needed to leave the country, often in unfavourable circumstances. These people, often well educated, were discriminated here. They often needed to do things below their qualifications. (...) Then the economic emigration started and it was very often at least pitiful. Very often I felt ashamed for them, and I couldn't understand why they were drinking beer on the street and insulting people, etc. (...) People released from prison were coming here as they knew there were plenty of Poles and they were robbing each other, so these were very unpleasant stories and at a certain moment, I maintained no relations whatsoever with other Poles and many people were wary of them, as such relations could generate problems. My opinion about these people is very negative and “Siemiatycze”²⁵ has become an insult. The opinion about these people is owed to a certain group (...). These people are incredibly primitive and they also differ from other Poles. As if the civilization had not reached them yet. (...) Everything is so much on the short term with these people. They exploit each other, and then... it is very primal, there is not much contact with these people, there is no way actually. You can have them as “femme de ménage”, and even this, better not. Now, a completely new wave has started, young people have arrived, often the Eurocrats' spouses, the “stagiaires”, this is completely different “niveau”, there are many nice people (...) (female, 41).

Some of the Polish officials stressed they had only very limited contact with other Poles, and, like the collocutor quoted above, clearly distinguished the group of manual workers from North-Eastern Poland.

²⁵ Siemiatycze is the name of a small town in North-Eastern Poland, whence many economic migrants in Brussels originated. It seems to have become a pejorative designation of the whole community of migrants from that region.

Certain interviewees revealed they did not feel at ease in the company of the other Poles, while others suggested that their compatriots originating in Siemiatycze might have inculcated in the host population a stereotypical and mostly negative view of Poles (e.g. heavy drinkers, primitive people or even robbers).

(...) Personally, I don't have any problems in dealing with these people, but well, I don't really need it, I don't have great communication with them and I am not seeking it (...). In principle, it is difficult to characterize a group which is so heterogenic, especially since there are also people of Polish origin and have lived in Belgium [for a long time] (male, 31).

Also outside the circle of my respondents, I quite often encountered strongly negative and stereotypical views on people from Siemiatycze. The Internet forum *Europracownicy* of *Gazeta Wyborcza* created by Polish “Eurocrats” was full of negative comments, which seems to indicate that the relations between the EU officials and other Polish communities in Brussels are pretty much poisoned. While describing the likely attitude of Polish economic migrants to them, the respondents often described the latter as full of envy.

Nonetheless, the opinions of some other collocutors were more nuanced. During the interviews I could learn that especially those “Eurocrats” who had been living in Belgium for many years were aware of the fact that the other Polish migrants constituted a non-homogenous group, including such diverse categories as: partners of the EU officials, friends working in the private sector or in international companies, doctors, engineers, students, or *stagiaires*. The opinion was often positive, although many of the interviewees took a cautious view, emphasizing their relatively infrequent contact with the non-EU Polish community.

I've met a couple of them. I've met people who work for international firms. I know Polish doctors, I know Polish contractors, I know also Polish people who work in construction, in shops, in homes. So, there is a wide variety of Poles working in Belgium and working in Brussels. And my perception of this minority here is rather positive. I think they are very skilful, very well integrated in the business tissue of Belgium. They know how to manage their business here. (...) In many situations, their position is much more complicated than mine. They don't have any fixed contracts. They need to jump from one job to another. If they are professionals they don't have any stable situation at all. They have to first confirm their licence here and then they have to find job. The contract is never open-ended. So those are contracts limited in time that force them to jump from one employer to another. So I think my impression is very positive (male, 47).

The opinion on “blue collar” migrants expressed by some respondents was even friendly, full of compassion, appreciation and solidarity.

(...) I think they are working quite hard here, sometimes, they work for much lower wages than the Belgian workers, sometimes they still don't have papers and everything they need, so it's true that they don't have all the rights. I think, for them it's difficult because some of them don't speak good French, Flemish or English (...). But I don't have too much contact with them (...) (female, 27).

However, as this account shows, even those more sympathetic respondents emphasized the fact that they did not have much contact with the “other” Poles in Brussels.

5. BUILDING A POLISH EU COMMUNITY

As Shore (2000: 164) suggests, there is a clear tendency among the uprooted or displaced persons to form “new communities and new networks of support among those in similar circumstances – particularly accessible and welcoming”.

It is also in line with the organisational network theory stating that social networks are structured by a natural tendency of people to interact mainly with people resembling themselves (McPherson et al., 2001, in Suvarierol, 2008: 702; see also Cailliez, 2004). A concept of “situational ethnicity” (Castles and Miller, 2003: 34) seems particularly relevant for the subject of the present paper. Ethnicity can be referred to for purposes of self-identification, “in a situation where such identification is necessary or useful” (Wallman, 1986, in Castles and Miller, 2003: 34). In the case of EU officials, their national identification is only a part of the picture. Indeed, it may make sense to invoke the fact of being a Pole while confronted with the host society or even a multi-national institution. It is indisputable, that being a Pole, speaking Polish, having similar traditions and particular habits, or being raised in the same cultural context, are likely to make the Polish EU staff eager to support each other. According to Field (2003: 1), by engaging in networking on the basis of common values, people create social capital.²⁶ These “social ties” can be profitable, as while investing in them one can expect that it will be reciprocal (Field, 2003: 12). The appropriate acquaintances permit achievement of one's objectives while “bypass[ing] the formal system” (Field, 2003: 2).

In the context of EU Institutions, Bellier (2000a: 7) observed that national solidarities “attract individuals looking for the sort of moral and affective support pro-

²⁶ Putnam (1993) defines social capital as “features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (cited in Field, 2003: 31).

vided by familiar surroundings – a sharing of codes, references, opinions, friendships, or simply the same language”. However, the Polish EU officials have apparently little in common with other Polish migrants living in Brussels, they feel different. Therefore, when confronted with other Poles, they tend to “invoke” their specific status and particular experience they have in common as a group of EU-officials.

Clearly, national networking in the EU Institutions is not a Polish invention. As Suvarierol (2009: 421) observes: “For newly arrived Commission officials who do not already have a friendship network in Brussels, (...), national networks may offer a smooth introduction to their new environment”.

One could argue, however, that, in the case of Polish EU Institution employees, the social networking had a particular form as its beginnings and further developments were closely linked to virtual *fora*. Encapsulated in the work-related environment and alienated from both Belgian and Polish communities, the “Eurocrats” created their own, self-sufficient universe. The community of experience and interests pushed them into deploying intensive networking activity both in the virtual and the real world. The Polish EU officials organize their own monthly meetings, they have also created two virtual networks (one with open access and one restricted only to the Polish “Eurocrats”).

Many of them recognize the advantage of these ties while looking for social support or information (mainly through virtual space: “EPS list”; the forum of *Gazeta Wyborcza*;²⁷ via monthly meetings at Wild Geese).

The first network of the Polish EU officials was created around the forum of the EPSO competition²⁸ laureates; the second was created as a mailing list based on professional EU Institutions e-mail addresses.

The “strong ties” existing between the members of the Polish EU community are quite natural in the case of a group of people sharing not only the same culture and experience, but also ideology, when it suddenly emerges in an unfamiliar environment. As was illustrated in the previous sections, Belgian society was widely perceived as distant, different and even unfriendly. As can be deduced from the stories quoted in the following parts, the Commission was also perceived, to a certain extent, as an alien power before which the freshly recruited Polish officials or laureates needed to join forces. This situation definitely favoured the creation of “strong ties” among the Polish EU officials, contributing to development of exclusive identification. This is also in line with the observation of Suvarierol (2009: 422) (made on freshly recruited East European officials that were included in her

²⁷ The second most popular Polish daily newspaper, also running a popular Internet portal.

²⁸ An entry competition organized by the EU recruitment services.

research group), who argues that “(...) for a newcomer it might be simply easier to set up a network with newcomers who are all more or less in the same age group and same situation if settling down at a new place and job”.

The Polish EU officials I interviewed assured me that the “Polish mailing list” is the only national virtual community of this size. Indeed, I have never come across information about a similar phenomenon among the “old” Member States’ officials. If indeed the Polish list was the only one, it would stand for an argument that the common experience of “newcomership”, lived simultaneously by all members of the Polish community, may have influenced its creation. Certainly, the flux of new officials from such Member States as France or Germany is relatively slow, the representatives of these nations are already strongly represented in the Institutions and there is never a critical mass of newcomers, of officials in the same situations facing a common challenge. Those who arrived 20 years ago also did not join the Commission in a context of a “Big Bang” – probably the first quasi-simultaneous recruitment of an important number of officials from new Member States in the era of developed Internet means of communication – as was the case of the Poles or officials from other “new” Member States. Hence, despite the absence of data on this subject, it can be assumed that they did not have the tendency or possibility to create homogenous groups of persons sharing the same situation. By contrast, the groups of officials from some other recent Member States may simply not be sufficiently numerous to follow the same scheme.

5.1. The EU forum of *Gazeta Wyborcza*: the beginning of the Polish EU Community

According to Leman (2000: 31), one of the most important aspects of life in the immigration of Polish “incomplete migrants” from North-Eastern Poland, was attendance at Polish mass: “Every weekend the Poland that these undocumented people left behind is recreated through Catholic religious worship. This takes place (...) through the sermons given by a Polish priest, who addresses the Polish congregation, instilling in them a feeling of great self-worth with regard to the city where they have come to seek work and to Western Europe in general”.

It seems that the church has ceased to play such an important role in the life of the new generation of Polish EU people. This can be partly explained by the fact that, in general, religion does not have that much importance in the lives of young educated people, originating mostly in the big Polish cities. Apart from that, for the previous group of Polish migrants, the mass created occasions to meet compatriots, to set up new social networks, and above all, to feel “at home”, as they were surrounded by co-nationals, they would forget for a while about their alienation from the local population, and the linguistic and economic barriers.

Obviously, the Polish EU civil servants do not need to compensate this type of weakness. They are well educated, their salaries are usually higher than that of an average Belgian, and many of them master at least one of the local languages. Furthermore, they are self-sufficient; they organize their own meetings and different social activities (i.e. weekend trips). Some of them do not even feel any need for “gathering” with compatriots, as they declared that they felt at ease in a multinational environment.

One could argue that, in the case of the Polish EU officials, new techniques of communication have taken over the role of a church, connecting members of the community, catalysing their relations and providing them with information and support.

The virtual forum *Europracownicy* of *Gazeta Wyborcza* was created during the examination phase as a first in the existing networks of support of the Polish EU staff. In 2004, it was in the period of its largest splendour and played a pivotal role in networking the rapidly growing professional community. At that time, the forum was considered as an important source of information related to the competition and the employment procedures in the European Institutions. Some people would also look for useful tips related to such practicalities as: hotels, reimbursement of the costs of accommodation and travelling but also payment of a daily allowance, while those already employed were spreading information about vacancies. The forum then constituted a kind of virtual marketplace for selling spare plane tickets, “vacant seats” in cars circulating between Belgium and Poland, or even manuals. In the period of post-examination recruitment, the forum served as a tool for finding a travel companion to go together for an interview, or to make appointments with future colleagues after interviews or medical examinations. Opinions on recruiting DGs and Heads of Unit were sought and exchanged, making the EPSO laureates realize the community of interest between them. Those who had just entered the Institutions still felt like outsiders in the environment where there were still very few Poles and they showed solidarity with those who were still knocking at the door. This attitude and these experiences could, in a specific way, influence the process of encapsulation of the Polish “Eurocrats”, since their identification with fellow Polish EU officials, but also with laureates, seemed to be, at least at that time, greater than their identification with the Institutions. At the same time, the exchanges on the forum also fed the feeling of alienation from other Poles, especially those in Brussels.

Later on, the forum included information on daily life in Brussels: about accommodation, the quality and cost of living, practicalities related to moving out, or the most convenient mobile phone operators. The new employees were asking for hints

about: medical examinations, transport to the airport, language schools for spouses, kindergartens, or child minders. One of the informants explained that the forum was particularly useful in the time preceding his arrival to Brussels:

I used the EU forum of “Gazeta Wyborcza”, especially before I moved, because without an EU Institutions e-mail address you cannot subscribe to the “Eps” discussion group. So, in that situation, all those people who are either interested in the EU Institutions or life in Brussels or are interested in working for the EU Institutions, they naturally subscribe to “Gazeta Wyborcza” (...) (male, 47).

At the beginning, the life of the current and future Polish “Eurocrats” was very much centred on this forum, while later on, it was extended outside its virtual “boundaries”, as some of the users started to arrange real meetings. Indeed, the forum became a space where people coming for the interviews could arrange appointments with those who were already in Brussels. These people were creating real socio-professional networks. Some of them had known each other from universities, previous work or via common acquaintances. The interviewee quoted below, who had been using the forum from its very beginning, declared he had made many new friends there:

(...) I had been using it long before I came here and in fact, while coming here, I had already known a lot of people from the forum. So, every time I was in Brussels for a job related interview, I was meeting a lot of my acquaintances whom I had known from Warsaw. Similarly, the meetings that take place here in Brussels in “Wild Geese” used to have their equivalent in Warsaw, also on a monthly basis. These meetings [in Warsaw] were attended by people attempting to find a job in Brussels. However, they do not take place any more. At the beginning, the forum of “Gazeta Wyborcza” was used very extensively by people who came here and, in fact, (...) the first meeting of the Poles took place thanks to the possibility of making an appointment on the forum (...) (male, 31).

One of the female interlocutors, a real old-comer who had been living in Belgium for several years before the accession, said she had been actively involved in the activities of the forum. As she recounts:

I came to know it somewhere at the end of 2004 – beginning of 2005. At the beginning, lots of things were going on there, as only very few people were already here and this information was very precious for those who were still in Poland. That is how I met people who are my friends now. These were people I didn't know before, girls. As I was in the first group of people who passed the exams and who got the job here, some people asked me various questions, e.g. how to behave during the interview. And I answered these questions on the basis of my experience. One of these persons found out my answers were not stupid and ap-

proached me in private. I have even prepared a kind of briefing for her, I know it sounds funny, before the interview. This has actually helped her a lot; she was not very self-confident and although I didn't tell her what she should do, but I guided her, as I knew what such an interview looks like. That is how we have become friends. (...) (female, 41).

Obviously, there were also some people who were less enthusiastic about the discussion forum and claimed that they had never really got any real help or advice from it. Its attractiveness was fading as more and more people, once employed, were turning to the internal mailing list. This phenomenon was partly due to progressive closing of the newly created Polish EU officials' group. One of the other reasons was certainly the fact that members of the other Polish community, usually active on another forum "Poland-Belgium", "invaded" the forum of *Gazeta Wyborcza* with their aggressive comments and, often, pointless discussions. As a result, many Polish "Eurocrats" preferred to exchange practical information on a private mailing list, rather than on a kind of "Hyde Park" that the Forum had become.

In fact, although the forum still exists today, it has ceased to play such an important milieu-and-opinion building role as before, especially as compared to the internal mailing list, commonly called the *Eps* list. Moreover, EU officials seem today to be showing less solidarity with laureates of successive EPSO competitions. Indeed, the Commission and the Parliament are now full of Poles and other "new" Member States nationals, the Institutions look more familiar and the Polish EU officials feel sufficiently part of them to start perceiving the laureates as people from outside. As one of my respondents argues: *It can be really useful if you want to find some information, but the other people see no more reason to give it, as they themselves have already got inside, so they see no reason to pass it on. (...)* (female, 41).

5.2. *Eps* mailing list: internal networking

One of the important differences between the forum of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the *Eps* mailing list is related to the fact that access to the latter is restricted only to EU Institutions employees, as in order to use it, one must be a holder of the EU Institutions e-mail address.

During one of the monthly meetings of Polish EU officials in Brussels, I was familiarized with the origins of the *Eps* mailing list created around 2005.

(...) Adam²⁹ has collected our e-mail addresses, and it was just a list of e-mails of a group of Poles who were working for the Commission. It consisted of only several persons, then twenty-something and then it reached about a hundred

²⁹ The real name of the "Founding Father" of the *Eps* mailing list was changed in order to keep him anonymous.

people and it started to be too difficult to write e-mails to such a numerous group. Then, one person founded a “Polish Club”, it was a kind of Internet service that does not exist anymore. This person has also established the “Eps” mailing list that has over one thousand people today and is used mainly for information purposes. When (...), for instance, something was broken in my car, and I do not know where to fix it, I would (...) refer to this list and (...) ask for advice on a mechanic whose services were appreciated. Sometimes, there are more specific questions, as, for example, about the procedures in the Commission (e.g. in the medical service, medical examinations) (male, 31).

As the example shows, in addition to its social role, the internal mailing list also plays a more practical one – as an important source of mutual assistance. It is interesting to note that many of the Polish EU Institutions employees are eager voluntarily to help their compatriots.

(...) The discussion list is used by the Polish expat community working in the European Union Institutions in Belgium, and also those who are working either for the European Parliament or the European Commission, but they are working in other countries like Luxembourg, in delegations in the Member States or even Overseas. (...) I think that the fact that it communicates a lot of information that is very useful to the members of the group makes the whole exercise valuable and people appreciate it. And it is popular just because it transmits information that is useful, that is quick, that people do not have any reservations about asking the question or sending out problems that sometimes they would consider private. (...) There are a lot of people who volunteer to answer these questions and provide some kind of solution, sometimes even help. (...) They dedicate their time to providing the solution and even finding ways to solve the problem, and even solve the problems themselves. They go out, talk to people, they help in moves, they help in translation. There have been problems that people had with tenants, problems with equipment, with computers, etc. (...) (male, 47).

As the following accounts demonstrate, the Polish “Eurocrats” believe that EU officials from other Member States do not have similar virtual support networks. Furthermore, they sometimes consider it as an important example of co-operation between the Poles abroad, standing in opposition to the stereotypical opinion on hostility amongst the Polish migrants.

I remember the list at its beginning. I found it completely natural and was persuaded everybody in the Institutions did the same; it turned out to be exceptional – actually quite strange. I look at the subject line of e-mails every day. Several times I used it and I know this is an excellent tool when you need to ask for help or information, I’d already happened to take advantage of it and I managed to

find someone who subsequently transported my suitcase to Wrocław. Concerning one exceptional event which took place on the list in the first year of its existence – I’ve mentioned it before [Polish e-mailing list addressees organized themselves to find the dog of one of them – and they actually found it] – well, I think this is just amazing, again – this could serve to put into question the myth about the lack of solidarity among the Polish people – apparently they can! If you look at such nations as Greeks or Italians – they just live in groups. The Poles do not have this particularity – they need to socialize in a more intimate circle. They will not help and support every Pole – nevertheless, they will need contact with and support from one, two, three persons of the same nationality (female, 43).

(...) [It] belies the common opinion that the Poles abroad are hostile to each other. I guess, one can see people trying to give good advice, inform each other about some [personal] development or integration opportunities or entertainment, without any hidden agenda, selflessly. These are all appreciable things and it remains in contrast to what you can normally hear about the Poles and their mutual relations abroad (male, 31).

However, similarly to the case with regard to the open Internet forum, some of the Polish EU officials were also more reserved in their opinions about the list. Notably, a woman who was quite popular in the circle of the Polish “Eurocrats” complained that the list has been overtaken nowadays by the young people, who always know everything better and sometimes even provoke quarrels. It seems that similarly to the case of the forum of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the profile of the *Eps* list has changed with time.

5.3. Monthly meetings: example of institutionalised socialisation

In addition to the virtual forms of networking, the Polish EU officials organize real meetings. One of the important, “ritual” events of a part of the Polish Euro-Community are the every-first-Friday meetings in one of the Brussels’ Irish pubs in the European district (the “Wild Geese”).³⁰ Although these meetings were targeted at the beginning to the newcomers who had found employment in the EU Institutions and who did not know how to approach other Poles working in the EU, nowadays they are also frequented by other Polish expats from the Institutions’ entourage (Polish diplomatic personnel, employees of regional representations, industrial organisations, lawyers, lobbyists etc.).

³⁰ In fact, there is no Polish pub or café that would be targeted explicitly at Polish EU bureaucrats. That is probably one of the reasons why most of the Polish “Eurocrats” gather in the aforementioned spot located close to their offices.

As was mentioned by one of the previously quoted interlocutors, the origins of the monthly meetings were closely linked to the forum *Euopracownicy* of *Gazeta Wýborecza*. Actually, it was there that the initiative of organizing real meetings both in Warsaw and Brussels was “born”. The woman, who had been living in Belgium for a long time before the accession of Poland to the EU and was one of the “found-ing parents” of these gatherings, explained their origins:

Before the “Wild Geese”, these meetings were taking place in “Chez Bernard”, then in the “Old Oak”. That is the place where the first persons employed were meeting. Actually, it has started in yet another way. I guess it was started by the Poles still in Poland. They started to communicate on the Internet forum of Gazeta Wýborecza and the first meetings took place in [the Irish pub] “Zielona Geś” in Warsaw, where I’ve been too. Actually, I went there once. I had started to communicate with them. And then I had the idea of organising something similar here. And, as I had lived here for a long time, I knew the language and the habits; hence many people asked me questions about various things. So at the beginning it was about mutual help, and then it has evolved independently (female, 41).

As could be understood from the interviews and from the study of discussions, there was a specific sense of identification or co-operation, a sense of a “We–feeling” developed between the laureates waiting still in Poland for the job with the lucky few who were already employed in Brussels. Those who were working by then in the EU Institutions were often writing supportive posts addressed to those who were still on the reserve lists and still meeting in *Zielona Geś* in Warsaw. In fact, some people animating in the past meetings at the *Zielona Geś* are now frequent visitors at “Wild Geese” in Brussels. Progressively, freshly employed members of the parallel community in Warsaw joined meetings in Brussels.

It is important to note that the “real life” networking of the Polish EU officials is not restricted exclusively to the meetings at “Wild Geese”. In fact, there are other organized hobby-related activities:

(...) Some of them [the Polish EU officials] sing in the choir, some play bridge. There is also a person who organizes trips, and there are a few such persons who participate in these trips, at least those who work for the EU Institutions (male, 31).

The majority of the Polish interviewees were aware of the monthly meetings in Brussels. On the whole, even if some of them were not interested in active participation, they regarded it as a good opportunity to socialize with compatriots.

6. CONCLUSION

It should be noted that this study examined principally the process of adaptation in the new socio-cultural environment of the Polish EU officials. On the whole, the research focused on the process and effects of enclosure of the Polish EU officials as a group in a work-related environment. The results of this study seem to confirm the view that the Polish EU officials form a distinct, relatively closed community. If the Polish EU officials show some openness towards other EU officials with whom they share professional life, rights, privileges and certain facilities, and even towards other expats, they do not really mingle with “other” Poles or with local people.

Polish EU officials have typically come to Belgium not only after career and money, but also in order to live in a multicultural environment, and to contribute to the supranational project. Already their motivation indicates that they would be more open to expats than to other Polish migrants, and that Brussels had a tendency to become their home. Indeed, contrary to most other Poles in Brussels, they are not trying to re-create “a little Poland” in Belgium; they are more open to other cultures and lifestyles.

Curiously, although they have incentives to stay in Belgium permanently (life-long contracts, good salaries), their accounts suggest they do not really try to adapt to the Belgian society, their attitude to the local reality is often critical and they are exposed to the process of encapsulation in a work-related environment. As their accounts demonstrate, they simply do not feel the need for integration with the host society, as the international character of the city offers them many other social opportunities. On the other hand, they also perceive the host society as “unwelcoming” and not very much interested in actually hosting them. Even though they are relatively well off and have always worked (as EU officials) legally, they feel quite uncertain about their perception by the local people.

On the whole, their situation can be referred to as “splendid marginalization”, “eternal expatriation” or “integration” into the international *strata* of Brussels.

These findings broadly confirm the previous studies conducted by other authors. However, as expected, the factors related to their Polish origin and experiences seem to play an important role in the aforementioned processes. Indeed, alienation from the local society seems to be strengthened by anticipation of rejection by the Belgians, allegedly looking down on the distant Eastern Europeans. They are aware of strong prejudices against the “Eurocrats”, but also fear extrapolation of negative stereotypes of East Europeans inculcated *inter alia* by the other Poles in Brussels, allegedly perceived as “underdog” physical workers, often causing trou-

ble. Although networking among the EU officials within a national group had been previously described by other authors, the intensity and organization of Polish EU networks still appears as an interesting phenomenon with a great integrating potential. However, this phenomenon certainly fosters the encapsulation. The Polish expats in Brussels, the EU Capital, often perceive themselves as different not only from the local population, but also from their compatriots because, no longer rooted in their native homeland, they feel more “consciously European”. Estranged from both Belgian and Polish communities, they have built a strongly integrated community based on intensive networking activity. The phenomenon of encapsulation in a kind of social cocoon is clearly visible. A strong “We-feeling”, due to a certain besieged fortress syndrome but also to a natural community of interests and problems, can be noticed.

However, it is difficult to judge whether this community, based on common interests and shared experience, is also tied by the feeling of loyalty towards the Institutions and it is still impossible to predict to what extent they will develop some kind of European identity, following the model of *engrenage*.

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Poljski službenici Europske unije u Bruxellesu: analiza zajednice u nastajanju

SAŽETAK

U radu se istražuje proces nastajanja i konsolidacije trajno iseljene zajednice od oko dvije tisuće poljskih službenika u institucijama Europske unije u Bruxellesu. Ta se skupina doima potpuno otuđenom od ostalih poljskih migranata u Belgiji i lokalnog stanovništva, a istovremeno čini jako integriranu zajednicu. Cilj je ove analize objasniti pokretače i dinamiku tog procesa te rastumačiti faktore koji olakšavaju zatvaranje: očekivano neprihvatanje od lokalnih zajednica potaknuto nacionalnim ili profesionalnim stereotipima, poistovjećivanje s institucijama Europske unije, ali i intenzivnu aktivnost umrežavanja. Rad se sastoji od dva dijela. U teorijskome se daje uvid u literaturu koja se odnosi na društvene osobitosti službenika Europske unije općenito, dok se u empirijskome istražuje proces koji se promatra posebno u odnosu na poljske službenike u Europskoj uniji.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: poljska zajednica u Europskoj uniji, enkapsulacija u prostoru, *engrenage*, adaptacija, društvene mreže

Julia ROZANSKA

Les fonctionnaires polonais de l'Union européenne à Bruxelles : analyse d'une communauté émergente

RÉSUMÉ

L'article se propose d'étudier le processus d'émergence et de consolidation d'une communauté d'expatriés de plus de 2000 fonctionnaires polonais travaillant au sein des institutions de l'Union européenne à Bruxelles. Ce groupe semble s'être complètement détaché tant du reste des immigrés polonais en Belgique que de la population locale et constitue, dans le même temps, une communauté fortement intégrée. La présente analyse a pour objectif d'expliquer le moteur et la dynamique de ce processus ainsi que d'éclairer les facteurs facilitant cette réclusion, à savoir le rejet prévisible de ce groupe par les communautés locales, induit par les stéréotypes nationaux ou professionnels, l'identification avec les institutions de l'Union européenne ainsi qu'une activité de réseautage intensif. L'étude se compose de deux parties. Le volet théorique fournit un aperçu sur la littérature se rapportant aux particularités sociales des fonctionnaires européens de façon générale. Le volet empirique se consacre, quant à lui, à l'examen du processus spécifique observé parmi les fonctionnaires polonais de l'Union européenne.

MOTS CLÉS : communauté polonaise au sein des institutions de l'Union européenne, encapsulation dans l'espace, engrenage, adaptation, réseaux sociaux