Logging into diaspora? Online identity narratives among the Romanian migrants in Ireland

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I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of PhD is entirely my own work, that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Acknowledgements

This section of the thesis was in all probability the most difficult to pen down mainly because in order to do so I needed to travel back down memory lane and to assess a period which has been very dear to me and which is now about to come to an end. Speaking 'in the past tense' about this amazing journey and about the wonderful people that I met along the way can be a nostalgic exercise.

Born and raised in Romania's capital city, I completed my undergraduate studies and also got my Masters Degree from the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Bucharest. Following a period of teaching and research at the same university, I arrived in Ireland in 2005 pursuing a dream that my husband and I shared: getting to know 'the world'. And so we started with Dublin. Little did I know that this decision would lead me to this wonderful learning environment which is Dublin City University and, more importantly, to meet such wonderful people as I did.

There is no exaggeration in saying that the years which I spent working on my PhD in DCU constituted one of the most exciting periods of my life so far. I learnt so many things along this fabulous journey, thus consolidating my professional experience as well as strengthening a wide range of professional and personal skills.

While this adventure felt at times like a lonely journey, a feeling that perhaps all PhD students experienced occasionally, I did not get lost along the way, credit to the guidance of two incredible people, my supervisors and my mentors: Barbara O'Connor and Ronaldo Munck. In addition to their advice which was crucial for the steady pace of the PhD process, they also instilled me with self-confidence and with ambition to perform my work at outstanding levels.

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Furthermore, I feel it is important to take advantage of this occasion and to thank them for the extraordinary moral support that they provided me during my years of PhD research. Their patience and fostering care helped me overcome several critical moments that had the potential to negatively impact on the timely progress of my research.

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Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that the years spent on the PhD were not only about work, but also about social interactions. Life has followed its course and all the memorable experiences which I encountered along the way impacted to a certain extent on my PhD. There were moments of joy and sorrow, of welcoming people in my life, while sadly parting with others. My life as a migrant mirrored to a certain extent the experiences of those that were my very subjects for this research: while I left my family and many friends behind, I extended my family here, in Ireland and I gained many friends for life.

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Abstract

Focusing on identity as a dynamic process, this research investigates the way members of the Romanian community in Ireland narrate and perform their cultural identities. Identities are not just a matter of possessing a certain cultural inventory (Barth, 1969) and they should be understood as relations rather than objects (Madianou, 2005). The way people define themselves and the way they draw boundaries between who they are and who is the 'other', is what really gives contour to the blurry concept of identity. Thus I adopt a constructivist approach to identity, one that focuses not solely on the 'content' of the diasporic identity (its cultural values, rituals, beliefs, belonging etc.), but also on the boundaries with other groups. It is at the boundaries that symbolic space is negotiated and identities are fiercely debated, constructed and re-constructed.

The role of media in shaping these identities is explored. Through the circulation of cultural values, media have an important impact on the way people view themselves and others. However, this research does not attribute media an all-powerful role in shaping cultures and identities of its audiences, but considers the process through which the audience (in this case ethnic minorities) actively create a meaning for media content.

Furthermore media refer not only to the content transmitted, but also to mediation, creating and maintaining bonds between people and encouraging debate. Habermas widely discussed the idea of a media-dominated 'public sphere' as a 'space' where cultural meanings are circulated and negotiated. From this perspective this research investigates in depth the role of the Romanian Community Online Discussion Forum (www.romaniancommunity.net) as an essential space for lively debate, a 'round table' where Romanians discuss about their lives in Ireland, the 'fate' of the motherland, and their diasporic identities.

Introduction

… We should promote our culture better… and change our image …. We are the laughing stock of Europe... It's like nobody likes us…. They are better at maintaining their culture… They spoil our image, Romanians are not like that… Romanians don't really stick together...

This list of seemingly random sentences represents an attempt to map out a few of the ideas incessantly making their way in Romanians' conversations: in private as well as in the public discourse, 'at home' or abroad, from the least educated to the academic researcher. Just as when playing a song in loop countless times until one begins to feel slightly obsessed with the tune, I underwent a similar experience in relation to the above-mentioned aspects. These ideas kept ringing in my head as I was trying to make sense of why Romanians are so obsessed with their identities or, to be more precise, with what is rather missing from their identities, i.e. "the empty half of the glass".

After I engaged in a migration journey of my own, these issues of identity began to resonate even stronger as they became almost omnipresent in all conversations surrounding me in the new context of the host society. Hence I became determined to embark on a research journey that aimed not so much to answer the big question of identity ('Who are Romanians exactly?'), but rather to explore the meanings which Romanians construct around their identities ('What does it mean to be Romanian?'). And, more importantly, how are media being used by Romanian migrants in the construction of their identities?

Existing identity-related scholarship credits the 'Other' with a tremendous role in the process of shaping and negotiating collective identities. The present study finds that this is also the case of the Romanian migrants as their discourses seem to be sprinkled generously with references to 'the Others' (e.g. 'being Gypsy' vs. 'being Romanian'; 'being part of the EU vs. non-EU'; 'being Orthodox' vs. 'being Catholic'; 'being a member of the Romanian community in Ireland' vs. 'being a member of the other diasporic communities'). This research is an attempt to critically engage with the concept of identity in the diasporic context by placing a strong emphasis on the relational aspect in the multifaceted process of identity construction.

In relation to the population studied in this research it is worth stating from the beginning that this study does not embark on the ambitious yet unattainable goal to formulate conclusions about all Romanians and not even about those Romanians that are living abroad. My research engages with the more manageable (from an empirical point of view) case study of Romanians that made 'a home away from home' (even if only temporary) here in Ireland. For reasons that will emerge from the following paragraphs (and also which will be fully detailed in the subsequent Methodology chapter), the focus of my research is shifted towards the online articulations of identity among Romanians in Ireland.

I opted for a study of 'identities in migration' mainly due to the interest that I developed in the multiple changes which a cultural identity undergoes when challenged by the migration process. Literature argues that cultural identities tend to become resurrected and at the same time contested by physical relocation. Thus a new process of negotiation of these cultural identities takes place in the new context, rendering these identities even more hybrid (as cultural identities are never pure and homogenous), being constructed at the intersection of being 'here and there' (or, perhaps, 'neither here, nor there').

Undeniably, the second reason for my choice of studying identities in the migratory context was the fact that, by being a migrant myself, I had the insider's advantage in studying a community of which I am part both formally - according to what my passport states – as well as subjectively – by identifying myself in various degrees with this community.

Using the word 'community' in the previous sentence poses a risk of being interpreted as less than a casual choice of words, and more as a statement, namely that Romanians in Ireland are indeed a community. Therefore it deserves to be mentioned at this point that, knowing the Romanian predilection to argue that 'Romanians, are not united', I decided to be cautious in surmising any collective feelings of belonging to an imagined diasporic community. Hence I started out on my research journey by looking closely at the situation of Romanians in Ireland: could we speak of them as a community or were they just a demographic group based on categorising them according to their country of origin?; were they isolated migrants, each with their views and

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feelings of belonging, or did they collectively construct shared identity discourses[1]?

Existing literature invariably recognises the vital role of the public sphere in the process of shaping and "baptising" these identity discourses. Hence, finding that 'stage', that public sphere where Romanians in Ireland unravel their identity negotiations became a key step. It emerged at this point that Romanian migrants living in Ireland, unlike some of the other migrant communities, do not have a distinct 'physical' place (such as a community centre or a favourite pub etc.) where they gather up and chat freely about, among many other aspects, their identities. There is, of course the Church or, better said, the Churches[2], but while these environments play a tremendous role in the lives of migrants, they hardly constitute spaces that would facilitate the negotiations of cultural identity in a wider sense than the religious aspect and promote debate and contestation in a way in which only media could. It was at this point that my attention became drawn towards the online discussion forum of the Romanian community and its rich resources presented in the form of archived conversations on a diverse range of topics.

Founded in 2004, the forum has continued its activity until today and the degree of interaction between users as well as the number of posts is significant, taking into account, of course, the rather small size of the Romanian community in Ireland[3]. Starting off as a coordinated effort of a very small group of volunteers to help facilitate access to information for those Romanian migrants who were struggling to regulate their stay in Ireland (asylum seekers, IBC applicants[4], work permit renewals etc.), the forum is today a lively arena where Romanians of various educational and occupational backgrounds meet everyday and approach a great variety of topics, from sharing information about life in Ireland to commenting on news stories from various sources, from complaining about the daily problems to discussing complex issues such as identity and belonging. On the forum, identity-talk seems to ooze from each

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[1] A discussion of the meaning of the term 'discourse' in the context of the present study is included in Chapter 5 of the thesis (*Methodology)*

[2] In 2011 there were two Orthodox Churches, one Roman Catholic, five Pentecostal, and three Baptist churches (Source: Romanian Embassy in Dublin http://dublin.mae.ro/index.php?lang=ro&id=14001)

[3] More information regarding the number of Romanians in Ireland is to be presented in Chapter 4, which provides an overview of Romanian migration to Ireland.

[4] IBC [Irish Born Children] refers to the permission to remain in the State granted to non-nationals [sic] who are the parents of an Irish born child, born in the State before 1 January 2005 (Source: Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service www.inis.gov.ie)

thread and topic, as online Romanians strive to make sense of who they are as a nation, as a diaspora and, last but not least, as an online community.

This study endeavours to contribute significantly to the emerging body of scholarship pertaining to the study of ethnic/diasporic/migrant identities. While the crucial role of the Other in the identity discourses had been theoretised by outstanding scholars such as Fredrick Barth, Zygmunt Bauman and Stuart Hall, this paradigm has only rarely been substantially employed in empirical research (Barker and Galasinski, 2001; Madianou, 2005; Georgiou, 2006; Ryan, 2007). Even fewer studies have credited the internet with a significant role in the shaping of identitarian discourses and, in the rare cases when they did, the accent has fallen on the static content of personal pages and diasporic websites (Thompson, 2002; Parker and Song, 2006) rather the dynamic interactions which take place on the online discussion fora (Chan, 2005; Ignacio, 2005; Elias et al, 2007).

In addition to this, the present study also notably contributes to the emerging scholarship on Romanian migration. Existing scholarship, which is yet in its infancy, tends to be mainly skewed towards quantitative approaches to the migration process in an attempt by government, universities, research centres and other research funding bodies to comprehend the extent of this phenomenon. In addition to statistical data collection, the recent years have also witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of studies focusing on the role of social capital and social networks as key resources mobilised by individuals and groups in their migration journey and the process of settling in the new country. From this perspective, migration research has mainly operated under the auspices of rational choice theory and it has therefore been understood in terms of the strategies or cost-benefit analyses which migrants supposedly engaged in previous to their migration journey. While these are nevertheless important aspects of the migration process, Romanian migration scholarship has been incredibly silent so far about the more complex aspects of Romanians' migration such as their employment of media in the shaping of their identities. Consequently my research significantly contributes to this particular direction of study and will thus hopefully become one of the founding bricks of the scholarship pertaining to Romanian migration abroad.

By adopting a qualitative research methodology that focuses on capturing the identity discourses of Romanians in Ireland as they take shape and become unravelled in the online space, this study aims to significantly contribute to the emerging body of research methodologies of virtual

communities. This empirical study constitutes a virtual ethnography (Hine, 2001) or, to use a more modern term employed by Kozinets (2010), a 'netnography' of the online discussion forum of the Romanian community in Ireland. Innovative methodologies for engaging with online communities have yet been insufficiently explored, in spite of the huge research potential of these communities for the social sciences (in particular in relation to the study on diasporic life and articulation of identities).

As it will be detailed in Chapter 5, engaging in an ethnographic study of 'the online' has certain advantages (as well as disadvantages) when compared with the already established tradition of face-to-face interview-based research. I argue that while in-depth interviewing is nevertheless a valuable tool in exploring the identity narratives of members of a migrant community, diaspora or ethnic group, by focusing on an interactive form of new media (as is the case of the discussion forum) one is able to experience a dynamic understanding of how collective identities take shape in interaction.

Moreover, in comparison with the few other similar studies, the methodology employed by this research takes advantage of the tremendous amount of information contained in the archives of the forum by including all this material in the analysis rather than selecting only several threads of discussion deemed relevant to the topic of diasporic identity. The result is a study that reveals an image of the online community as a whole, pointing towards more than just a few salient identity-related aspects emerging from several discussion threads, but rather to a deeper understanding of the community with all its relevant moments. It is a matter of following in the path of the 'offline' ethnographer and becoming deeply immersed in the studied community, even if in this case that is to be achieved by innovatively adapting the traditional ethnographic methods. This approach allows the researcher to take more than a snapshot of how members of a community define their cultural identities (as tends to be the case of many studies focusing exclusively on interview-centred methodologies), but rather to capture 'the motion' as well, namely the process of negotiation and collective construction of identities: for example, are Romanians constructing various identity discourses before and after joining the EU?; are these discourses different after having spent a considerable number of years in Ireland?

Following the well-established structure of research reporting combined with the specific requirements of editing the PhD thesis, this volume is structured in three main parts. The first section (Part 1) aims to critically engage with the

main theories pertaining to the three broad topics at the confluence of which this study has taken shape, namely migration, media and identities. Thus, these first three chapters constitute the theoretical framework upon which the present research is founded.

The second part (Part 2) of the thesis contains two chapters: Chapter 4 is focused on presenting the background to the case study of this research. This helps contextualise Romanian migration to Ireland within the greater framework of post-communist Romanian emigration, but also to understand several aspects relating to the Romanian Community in Ireland and its online discussion forum. Chapter 5 consists of a detailed account of the methodology employed by this empirical study. The chosen empirical methods are critically assessed against the methodologies employed by other studies on similar topics.

The last section (Part 3) encompasses the main body of findings emerging from data analysis and it is structured into four separate chapters. Chapter 6 maps out the wider context of media use of Romanians in Ireland. While the focus of this chapter tends to fall on the forum users' 'confessions' about their media use, general aspects pertaining to the Romanians in Ireland are also be highlighted. The main aim of this chapter is to understand the role played by media (and the forum in particular) in the lives of its users, particularly as their cultural identities and their diasporic lives are concerned.

As diasporas (or migrant communities in general) are assumed to construct their identity discourse at the interplay between the 'home' and the 'host', the following data analysis chapters (Chapter 7 and Chapter 8) focus precisely on the contested relationship with these two key referents in the identity discourse. Feelings of belonging and not-belonging to the homeland and, respectively, to the host society are mapped out.

The last chapter within this section (Chapter 9) draws on the rich fieldwork data to construct the various categories of 'us' and 'them'. Hence the groups which constitute the important elements of alterity in the Romanian online identity discourses are explored in depth.

The thesis draws to a close with a presentation of the main conclusions emerging from this research and a full list of bibliographic references used in the elaboration of the theoretical and methodological framework.

Part 1 Theoretical framework and review of literature

Chapter 1 - At the meeting point: shaping identities in the migratory context

Outline of the chapter

The first chapter sets out to outline the key theoretical perspectives emerging from studies of migration and identities. This chapter is structured into three main sections which provide an ample review of the main body of work published in the field of migration studies, identity studies and, respectively, diasporic identity studies.

Since the present study focuses on the process of identity construction in the diasporic context, it is essential to begin by mapping out some of the relevant theories and concepts in migration research. Without attempting to provide a comprehensive review of all migration theories, the section starts by critically highlighting the main approaches to migration studies, including here both the early neo-classical economic perspectives on the migration phenomenon (understood as a macro-level phenomenon) and also the more recent anthropological and sociological perspectives focusing on the 'softer' and more complex factors that may play an essential role in the individuals' decisions to migrate as well as the duration of stay abroad in a particular country. As it becomes evident from existing data, these factors are crucial to the study of the more intricate aspects related to identity and belonging.

This section also includes references to the main models of migrant integration, namely assimilation, multiculturalism, transnationalism. Whether we refer to these concepts as policy models for dealing with migrants in the host societies or whether we understand these notions as the migrants' own strategies for negotiating their belonging to the host society/homeland, it is essential to outline the important links between these concepts and the process of identity construction.

The second section of this chapter continues with a review of the significant body of scholarship developed around the concept of 'identity'. This review discusses how the term has emerged and achieved a key role in the social sciences. The main challenges in engaging with this concept in empirical

research are outlined and some of the key attempts to address these issues are analysed in depth.

Finally, the last section of this first chapter reunites the two main concepts ('identity' and 'migration') as it aims to critically engage with the existing studies focusing on identities in the migratory context. The section strives to investigate and clarify to a certain extent the meanings of some of the key concepts linked to the topic studied, namely cultural identity, ethnicity, and diaspora. Such notions have raised multiple challenges to social researchers in their endeavour to trace the exact contour of the meanings associated with these concepts.

The chapter concludes by arguing that many significant gaps (both theoretical and empirical) remain in the field of migration and identity studies. However in spite of these difficulties, many of these challenges could be overcome by engaging with more complex and innovative perspectives on identity research.

1.1 Changing approaches in migration studies: from searching the root causes to dealing with its profound implications

Early theories of migration: the push-and-pull factors

Typically, migration was viewed as a linear process with easily identifiable components: the individual (or group), the context (in both the country of origin and the receiving country), the decision process, and, finally, the actual relocation process to the desired destination. While some migration theorists focused on one component or the other, very few early studies grasped the complexity of the entire process, by providing an overall view of the migratory process.

For example, some of the early neo-classical migration studies (Lewis, 1954 cited in Massey et al., 1993) focused exclusively on migration at the macro level arguing that this process was a result of economic differentials (in particular wage) between different geographical areas. Other neoclassical economists viewed migration as an individual decision grounded in a cost-benefit analysis within the context defined by the set of opportunities and constraints in both sending and receiving countries (Borjas, 1999).

There are also theorists that viewed migration as a decision aimed not only at maximising income, but mainly at reducing the vulnerability associated with the economic risks in their country of origin (Katz and Stark, 1986 cited in Massey et al., 1993). From this perspective, migration was a strategy which certain groups chose to pursue in order to minimise the household risks associated with unemployment, poverty, market failures etc.

Many of the early theories of migration thus placed an emphasis on the role of the push-factors, i.e. factors in the immigrants' countries of origin which determined people to migrate. Other theories highlighted the role of the pull factors which are linked to the country/ countries of destination. Piore (1979) for example argued that the receiving countries' constant need for immigrant labour played a strong role in motivating people to migrate.

Bogue (1969 cited and adapted in Anghel and Horvath, 2009, p.34) compiled a list of some of the most common push and pull factors that might determine decisions to migrate:

Push factors	Pull factors
• Decline of natural resources or in the demand for certain products (e.g. closure of a mine, restructuring of agriculture etc.) • Loss of employment • Discriminatory treatment on the grounds of politics, religion or ethnicity • Cultural alienation from a community • Lack of opportunities for personal development, employment, marriage; • Retreat due to natural or humanly created catastrophe	• Superior opportunities for employment, higher income, or education; • Preferable environment and living conditions; • Dependency of a person that has already migrated • An environment which is richer in cultural, intellectual and leisure opportunities

Table 1.1. *Push and pull factors (adapted from Bogue, 1969 - cited in Anghel and Horvath, 2009)*

Berger and Mohr (1989) also pointed to an important factor that might influence migrants to leave their country of origin. The two authors stated that the lack of dynamism in the homeland is one of the key reasons for migration.

These aforementioned studies focused mainly on the analysis of diverse push and pull factors as the focal causes of migration. It was generally believed that by identifying the main factors which constituted the causes of this phenomenon, researchers would be able to explain and eventually predict the evolution of migration flows.

There are however multiple limitations to the structural approach (based on the push and pull factors) in explaining the migration phenomenon. On the one hand this type of explanation does not clarify why migration does not act as a 'perfect', self-regulating market: it is a clear fact that migrants do not always relocate to those environments that offer them the best opportunities. It becomes thus evident that this approach tends to ignore other important factors that may contribute to influence migrants' decisions to travel to (and settle in) a particular location.

In order to address some of these aforementioned limitations, other studies have taken a rather different stance on the migratory phenomenon, by shifting their focus from the macro-level (structural) factors to other factors located at the group or network level (meso level) and even at the individual level (micro level). For example, some researchers have investigated migration

at the grass-root level, by focusing on the important role played by resources in the migration project. The strategies that pre-migrants and migrants develop in order to accumulate and utilise resources during their transnational journey become of key importance to this strand of research. Other researchers have given particular attention to the role of social capital, networks and other institutional intermediaries (such as the church etc.) in the migratory project. (Sandu, 2010; Waldinger, 1997; Koser and Pinkerton, 2002; Vasta, 2004). For Romanian migration, these factors have been very important in generating and maintaining the migration phenomenon. According to Anghel and Horvath (2009), the neo-protestant churches (e.g. the Adventist Church) or the Catholic Church have stimulated migration flows directly through religious pilgrimages, but also indirectly through the social networks of the church members. Non-religious social networks have also played important roles in the Romanian migration by stimulating people to migrate, but also by providing a safety net for migrants upon arrival in the country of destination[5] (Sandu, 2005; Şerban and Grigoraş, 2000; Sandu, 2006; Elrick and Ciobanu, 2009).

In spite of its limitations, the main merit of the 'push/pull' strand of research is that it helps us contextualise the 'border-crossing' phenomenon, namely to scrutinise the conditions under which people chose to migrate and why, and also to analyse the implications of these push/pull factors in the process of engaging with the homeland and the host society. It is from this perspective that these aspects are expected to bear a strong mark on the process of identity construction.

From root causes to consequences. Managing migration's impact: assimilation and multiculturalism theories

A distinct strand of migration research focuses on the remarkable implications of migration in both countries of origin and of destination, as well as the effects of this phenomenon on the lives of migrants.

Similar to the migration theories focusing on the push-and-pull factors, this approach has also spun off from economic scholarship. Hence it initially

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[5] In spite of the strong network character of Romanian migration, several other studies also point out the downsides of over-reliance on these networks of support. For example, lack of the promised support, work exploitation, trafficking, network constraints that impede them from taking advantage of certain opportunities are only few of the aspects mentioned by several studies (Sandu, 2006; Elrick and Ciobanu, 2009).

focused exclusively on the economic consequences of migration for both the origin as well as the receiving countries. A few examples of such economic effects include, among others, the role of migrant remittances, the economic costs and benefits associated with the brain drain phenomenon, the implications that migration had for labour markets and the level of wages (Borjas, 1999).

These mainly economic theories and models had however a very limited explanation potential. Gradually more and more social studies have begun to acknowledge other multiple and varied implications produced by migratory projects on host societies and also on migrants themselves.

For example, according to Anghel and Horvath (2009), contemporary migration represents a continuous challenge for the dominant models of producing and maintaining social cohesion while challenging as well the notions of belonging, nation state and citizenship (:16).

Also from the migrant's perspective, migration cannot be considered as a "simple individual action in which a person decides to move in search of better life-chances, pulls up his or her roots in the place of origin and quickly becomes assimilated in the new country" (Castles and Miller, 1998, p.19). Thus, for individual actors, migration is usually a long-term process, a process which is perhaps never fully completed, and which impacts on almost all aspects of their lives.

Therefore, as the perception of migrants as guest (temporary) workers had gradually lost ground, a significant body of social research has shifted its attention towards investigating the complex implications of migration in the political, cultural and social fields. As Saskia Gent (2002) notes, migration is not "a one-time and one-way event" (:21). Migration is a continuous flow of people, money, information (ibid.) and, at the same time, a flow of culture and ideas between two or more countries.

Due to mass migration's significant impact on the host societies, many politicians, policy makers and theorists alike have strived to identify ideal models of incorporating migrants into the receiving countries. One of the earliest, the assimilationist approach, is based on the assumption that, in order to successfully integrate, migrants would need to be completely 'absorbed' by host societies, i.e. to be "acculturated and indoctrinated into the language and customs of the nation to which they will belong" (Takacs, 1999, p.596-597). Portes and Borocz (1989) define this approach as the "unilinear process of immigrant adaptation to the host society" (p. 614). According to Castles and Miller (1998), "immigrants are expected to give up their distinctive linguistic,

cultural or social characteristics and become indistinguishable from the majority population" (p.245). Thus, the onus for change is placed solely on the migrants (Rudiger and Spencer, 2003).

The assimilationist approach has a long tradition in the social sciences. Robert Park, one of the main founders of the original Chicago School of Sociology, argued that in the future the whole world would resemble a melting pot as ethnic and racial bonds would be forgotten and the peoples of the world would be integrated into a broad system of shared cultures and social relations (Park, 1926 cited in Cornell and Hartmann, 1997, p.7). However it becomes evident that this rather idealistic prediction is further and further away from the everyday realities in many Western societies today.

In Parekh's view, assimilationists demand migrants to make a dramatic choice:

> If they want to be accepted as full and equal citizens, they should assimilate into the national culture, exchange their inherited or imported identity for one derived from their new country and undergo a kind of cultural rebirth (Parekh, 2008, p.83).

Parekh (2008) agrees that the assimilationist paradigm has some reasonable merits and argues that it is common for people living together to become more and more similar in their habits, interests, tastes and habits. However he points out that it would be wrong to institutionalise this principle and demand migrants to achieve a "greater degree and range of unity than is possible or necessary" (ibid.)

The assimilationist perspective has been critiqued by many authors for its prescriptive baggage. The attempt to melt all cultural differences into a unique, homogenous culture is deemed by current scholarship to be both objectionable as well as unattainable in practice. Takacs (1999), for example, metaphorically compares the process of assimilation with that of enforcing a new 'fake' body on the migrants: "the immigrant must wear the national body as a prosthesis and exchange loyalty to the state for the protection of this prosthetic body" (p.597). Thus, what Takacs highlights is the unnaturalness that this model presupposes.

Moreover, research shows that some immigrant groups may be more open to being assimilated into the culture of the host country. For example, Mirdal and Ryynänen-Karjalainen (2004) discuss existing research on certain immigrant groups (such as the Albanian immigrants in Greece) who tend to adopt strategies to become assimilated faster in the native population: e.g.

changing their names and religion and baptising their children in order to be more rapidly integrated and to strengthen future opportunities for next generations (Nikova, 2002 cited in Mirdal and Ryynänen-Karjalainen, 2004). On the other hand there is also research evidence that shows other migrant groups to be almost 'unmeltable', especially when encountering rejection from the mainstream society (Rutter and Tienda, 2005). While there may be the assumption that the unmeltable migrants are those whose cultures would be quite distinct from that of the host society, research cited by the two authors indicates that even immigrant groups which tend to be similar to the dominant society in relation to their physical appearance, class background, religion and language may not, in practice, be as swiftly assimilated as initially expected.

Assimilationism has started to slowly lose ground from the 1960s onwards signalled by "a growing rejection of policies or public pressure calling for immigrant and ethnic assimilation" (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2005, p.2). However the recognition of minorities' cultures and identities was at that stage still far from being achieved. It was only during the 1970s that societies hosting immigrants accepted notions such as tolerance, representation, participation and group/cultural/minority rights (ibid.).

These significant shifts were the prerequisites for the emergence of the concept of multiculturalism in the 1970s-1980s (Vertovec, 2001; Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2005). The multicultural approach implies a recognition of cultural plurality in modern societies under the principle of equality (Rudiger and Spencer, 2003), thus marking the transition from the 'melting-pot' philosophy of integration to a perspective that acknowledges the pluralism of ethnicities and cultures that co-exist in the cultural 'salad-bowl' as Thomson (2002) describes the immigrant-receiving countries.

According to Vertovec and Wessendorf (2005), multiculturalism is considered by some theorists to be a 'correction' to the previous assimilationist policies. In spite of striving to address the fierce critiques of assimilationist theories, the emergence of multiculturalism as an all-comprising concept has not led to an overall acceptance of its proclaimed benefits. According to the same authors, this concept lacks clarity and it is used rather as an umbrella-concept, covering many distinct and sometimes overlapping phenomena, ranging from a demographic reality (which refers to the actual makeup of a society), to a broad political ideology and a socio-political policy (ibid. p.3-5).

Moreover, while many countries adopted the multicultural model, tolerance towards diversity had not been overall accepted. The discourse of

loyalty to the national state has re-emerged in many Western societies, especially following the September 2001 attacks. The implicit assumption is that multiculturalism policies 'encourage' migrants to keep intact the cultural identity acquired in their original national environments even in the new context of the destination countries.

Multiculturalism also fails to defuse the fear that immigration is set to bring a "superabundance of diversity, an excess of alterity" to the host society (Sartori, 2002 cited in Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2005), hence it may be viewed as a threat to social cohesion (Rudiger and Spencer, 2003). The same point is conveyed by Morley and Robins (1995) as they conclude that difference (in particular cultural) is problematic because it tends to be experienced "as a scandal and a defect of identity" (Morley and Robins, 1995, p.25).

Furthermore, multiculturalism is viewed as a burden for receiving societies as it "may destroy the isomorphism between people, polity and nation" (Aksoy & Robins, 2003, p.371) and may force the "individuals in the dominant group to re-evaluate (and hence temporarily destabilize) their inherited identities, heroes, symbols and narratives" (Kymlicka 2003, p.205 cited in Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2005, p.23).

Hence, in spite of its original aims, multiculturalism as a model has been accused of failing to promote an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance of diversity and its benefits. Even more so, Schierup and Älund (1991) argue that this model of integration may eventually risk generating newer, more sophisticated and more subtle forms of racism.

As a policy model, multiculturalism is presently considered by many of the Western countries as a failed experiment. Many political leaders among which David Cameron, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy have all highlighted the demise of multiculturalism as the ideal model for managing cultural diversity. Not only politicians, but many social scientists alike agree that celebrating multiculturalism cannot solve all problems raised by increasing cultural diversity (Anghel & Horvath, 2009) and therefore a more complex understanding of migration and cultural diversity is absolutely essential.

While in many instances the utter opposition between the assimilationist model and the multicultural model is being brought to the forefront, recent studies on migration indicate that between these two models of integration there are also many similarities to be noted.

One of the main criticisms associated with the assimilationist approach is that this view assumes the existence of monolithic culture or social order in

which migrants need to be assimilated (Rudiger and Spencer, 2003). The idea of a national culture as a single, homogenous entity is dismissed by most social researchers and theorists today. However, multiculturalism entails the same assumption of a 'container model' of the nation state and culture (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) where "social cohesion, cultural belonging and political participation are mutually defined within the geographical and administrative boundaries of the state" (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2005, p.24).

Thus while multiculturalism militates for the recognition of migrants' cultures and the creation of a social environment that allows for ethnic and cultural pluralism, both the assimilationist and the multicultural model operate with the same notion of culture. Whether we talk about 'melting into the core' or about diversity and cultures co-existing side by side, the underlying assumption is that culture is a static reality, a container with a territorially-bound identity. According to Faist (1999), the possibility for cultural diffusion and syncretism is thus completely ignored by either of the two approaches. Hence, just like assimilationism, the multicultural perspective tends to museumise culture and to assume a fixed connection between culture and territory (Werbner, 2003).

Moreover, both models discussed tend to approach migration as a discrete event: a geographical relocation from one setting to another. This type of understanding of the migration process completely ignores the complexity of the migratory journey which may involve multiple moves across the border and manifold pendulations between 'homeland' and 'host' country.

The transnational perspective

According to Vertovec (2004), an alternative to both the assimilationist and the multicultural approaches was opened in the late 1980s when the concept of transnationalism hit the migration scene. While this approach is not necessarily an alternative integration policy of migrants into the host societies, Glick Schiller et al. (1995) argue that transnationalism has indeed opened a whole new approach to understanding immigrants and their identities. The authors point to the fact that contemporary immigrants can no longer be characterized as "uprooted" mainly because many migrants do not simply abandon one 'original' culture in order to close up one chapter in their lives before starting a brand new life in the new cultural context. Transmigrants may

thus become firmly rooted in their new country, while at the same time maintaining multiple linkages to their homeland (p.48).

The transnational optic points to one of the most important aspects of diasporic identities and that is their hybrid nature. Identities are fluid and complex as they are constructed from more than one source (Zappone, 2003). Hence the container model of the public sphere no longer works as a frame of analysis in migration studies. Jeffres (2000) also supports this line of argument and states that migrants need to be viewed more and more as actors which have gained and are maintaining competence within two cultures.

It is however important to note that transnationalism does not completely dismiss the previous approaches to migrants' integration into the host societies. This new optic points out that while any form of migration implies some degree of assimilation, migration does not mean "a clean break with the past; on the contrary, one's ethnic affiliation with all its attendant responsibilities re-emerges" (Fludernik, 2003, p.xxii) as migrants will always remain tributary to the "particular cultures, traditions, languages, systems of belief, texts and histories which have shaped them" (Kolar-Panov, 1995, p.302).

Basically what transnationalism questions is the so-called linearity of the migration process. Drawing a parallel to the work of the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1909 [1960]) who discussed the three stages of a rite of passage (i.e. separation, liminality and incorporation), I argue that migrants were previously expected to undergo a similar sequence of phases: leave the homeland (separation), then experience a period of confusion in their process of adaptation to the new culture (liminality) only to become assimilated eventually into the host culture (incorporation). Current research from a transnational perspective questions this linear and rather simplistic view by bringing both theoretical as well as empirical counter-arguments and examples.

Consequently, the question that deserves to be asked at this stage is whether incorporation is ever a possibility for the first generation of migrants or is it more likely for them to be confined to a continuous state of liminality. To use Rushdie's (1995) analogy, being transnational feels sometimes like straddling between two cultures, while at times it may feel like falling between two stools as alienation from both 'the home' and 'the host' culture are experienced. Several authors, such as Glazer & Moynihan (1975), tend to support the argument that migration does not conclude with assimilation, but rather with the construction of new groups and with the development of a multitude of ethnic identities. Other scholars also highlight the idea that migrants tend to form multilocale

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attachments (Chan, 2005; Faist, 1999) rather that belonging exclusively to the home- or the host culture. These aspects ultimately have profound implications for identity and belonging.

The transnational perspective acknowledges that national identity is 'portable' (Sassen, 1998) and also that migrants may seek forms of membership and belonging in more than one place (Vertovec, 2001, p.12). Migrants' lives become thus entangled in a network of links and activities taking place in both their host and home societies: "[t]heir lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field" (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p.1). Thus, the transnational paradigm enables a view of migrants that no longer pack and unpack their culture in the migratory process from the origin to the country of destination. According to Faist (1999), the transnational exchanges of meanings across social and symbolic ties allow for "old patterns [to] go into a synthesis with new ones" (p.30).

Maintained over time, these symbolic ties between distinct geographical entities lead to the formation of transnational social spaces. According to Mirdal and Ryynänen-Karjalainen (2004), these spaces need to be understood as more than the mere geographical movements of people, "but also [as] the circulation of ideas, symbols and material culture" (p.15). Consequently, transnationalism represents more than a visualisation of the multiple connections between geographical places. The transnational perspective provides a new analytic optic (Ayse Caglar, 2001 cited in Vertovec, 2004), one that allows us to view culture not as an entity contained within a nation-state (Hannerz, 1996), but as a symbolic space which can be negotiated in the absence of a clear territorial referent.

Thus, this type of approach raises multiple challenges to the understanding of concepts such as culture, identity, and the nation state. As Robins (2008) argues, cultural complexity is seen in the national mentality as a threat and many authors have metaphorically referred to the nation state as a panic machine which continually questions migrants' loyalty to the host society. Hence, according to Stuart Hall, at the political level the response to hybridity has often consisted of powerful attempts to "reconstruct purified identities, to restore coherence, 'closure' and Tradition" (Hall, 1994 [1992], p.311).

One of the key motives for the wide embrace received by this concept in the social sciences is that by adopting a rather 'transnational stance' on migration (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2005), the process is no longer rendered

as a discrete (geographical) event marked by nation-state level localism, but rather as a

> multi-dimensional economic, political, cultural and demographic process that encapsulates various links between two or more settings and manifold ties of movers and stayers between them (Faist, 1999, p.14).

While the importance of this perspective in the study of migration is tremendous, there is also a certain amount of criticism directed towards this more recent approach. One of the key aspects signalled by many theorists is related to conceptual conflation and overuse. Faist (1999) insists on the necessity to clearly define the concepts that make up the 'transnational' field as, in many cases 'transnational' is used as a 'catch-all phrase' for all cross-border ties.

Moreover, another weakness of the concept is that while allowing us to conceive ties and communities that exist beyond the borders of the nation state, the transnationalist perspective risks presenting an image of deterritorialised migrant groups or communities, that belong neither to their countries of origin, nor to the host countries. It is this argument that Rogers (2000) raises when citing the earlier work of Guarnizo and Smith (1998). Rogers (op. cit.) critiques some of the representatives of the transnational orientation in the study of migration for "their desire to move away from the kind of bounded entities and concepts which characterised standard migration research" (p.4), but ending up studying deterritorialised, 'free-floating' transnational migrants. Rogers (2000) further argues that we need to understand transnationalism as more than a set of abstract cultural flows and that we should focus more on the everyday changes that transnationalism brings in people's lives.

Thus, transmigrants are not 'free-floating' people, but rather

> immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state (Schiller et al., 1995, p.48 cited in Cheng, 2005, p.145).

Highlighting a similar argument, Tsagarousianou (2004) feels that transnationalism should not only be understood in terms of 'dispersion', but also in terms of the constant interaction taking place at the transnational level.

While adopting a transnational approach may be interpreted as a desire of scholars to distance themselves from the much criticised assimilationist and multicultural perspectives, Rogers (2000) argues that we do not have to see these approaches as entirely opposed. Grillo (2001) supports this view and

notes that both assimilation and multiculturalism entail forms of transnational ties. However the author argues that the transnationalist perspective has managed to surpass the essentialism which prevailed until not so long ago in the way nation-states and cultures were conceived (p.26).

In conclusion, when discussing the issue of ethnic or diasporic identities, transnationalism becomes particularly important as it allows us to understand that migrants do not necessarily face an 'either/or' choice when constructing their discourses of identification. Rather, according to Basch et al. (1994), transmigrants find themselves confronted with and engaged in the nation building processes of two or more nation-states (p.22).

Some authors have dismissed transnationalism as a plain outcome of technological breakthroughs that have allowed for easier communication between migrants and families and friends 'back home' (or located elsewhere for that matter). However, while the presence of technological innovations may facilitate communication, many scholars argue that the technological factor does not explain why immigrants feel compelled to invest time, energy, and resources in maintaining ties to their homelands (Basch et al., 1994, p.24). Therefore it is essential to understand migrants' decisions to engage in these transnational interactions and also to look further at the implications that transnational encounters have for their identity construction.

1.2   Benchmarking identity theories

Mapping the terrain of identity research

Identity is a term that has sparked criticisms in academic debates, with some scholars fully embracing this rather insufficiently defined concept, whereas others militate for its complete removal from the vocabulary of social sciences. However, in spite of the fierce criticism, identity research has become a central part of the social sciences.

It would be difficult to outline the exact evolution of the concept of identity in the social sciences or the moment when the term was coined. However, since the publication of the works of Erik Erikson and Gordon Allport in the late 1950s and early 1960s, identity has emerged as a key topic in the social sciences. Many scholars credit Allport's book *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) with a considerable role in linking identity to ethnicity.

Since the late 1970s identity has become a distinct area of studies in the social sciences, and while the initial interest was geared towards class identity, it soon followed to focus on gender and sexuality, age, religion, race and ethnicity (Brubacker and Cooper, 2000; Jeffres, 2000; Georgiou, 2006). In particular in the field of migration studies, research on identity and belonging has flourished over the last two decades.

Just like all main concepts in the social sciences, 'identity' has got its fair share of fierce debate around its meaning and its alleged utility for the social sciences. Stuart Hall, one of the main contributors to the scholarship on identity, traces the major shifts in the definitions of this disputed concept throughout its history.

The early modern conceptions of the subject viewed the individual as a rational and conscious person, with an inner core that remains stable throughout life. From this perspective, the meaning and the definition of identity would seem apparently unproblematic: the core that characterises an individual is therefore its identity. This perspective has drawn a lot of criticism as it fails to consider individuals in their social interactions and how their identities may be shaped in contact with the social environment.

A second alternative, focuses on the 'sociological subject' whose identity is made up of the inner core that gives identity stability in time, but it also encompasses layers that are "formed through interaction with significant others"

(Hall, 1994 [1992], p.275). Therefore while this approach bridges the gap between the micro and the macro (i.e. the individual and society), it still takes on a rather static perspective on identity thus leaving no scope for understanding why individuals' identities may differ significantly from one moment to another or social context to another.

Finally identity may be understood in a post-modern perspective. While the two previous definitions tend to suggest that identity is a rather 'finished' thing, a post-modern identity needs to be understood as an open-ended project. The post-modern subject has, according to Hall (1994 [1992]), no fixed identity as it is continuously being constructed and reconstructed, negotiated and re-negotiated in different situations and contexts. Thus, identity becomes a process, rather than a static reality:

> […] instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (Hall, 1990, p.222).

Hence throughout the history of this concept, we tend to notice a shift from the 'old' essentialising perspective on identity - identity as a 'given', a static reality - to a post-modern approach to identity as a process which undergoes continuous construction and re-construction (Hall, 1994 [1992]).

Identity is thus not only about "being", but also about "becoming" (Georgiou, 2006; Triandafyllidou and Wodak, 2003), a process that is "constantly renewed, confirmed or transformed, at the individual or collective level, regardless of whether it is more or less stable, more or less institutionalised" (Triandafyllidou and Wodak, 2003, p.210).

Moreover, the post-modern individual is no longer believed to have a single, homogenous identity (Giddens, 1991; Husband, 2005), but rather a fragmented one which the individual assembles (just like a mosaic) from a wide array of possible identifications. Thus, one of the main contributions brought by post-modernism in identity studies is that old, stable identities give rise to new, fragmented ones (Hall, 1994 [1992]) thus allowing us to understand that multiple facets of an identity may coexist (hybridity) although they may appear to be contradictory and in conflict.

Although the post-modern identity approach may appear to solve some of the key problematic issues in understanding identity, it has also generated a significant amount of debate and criticism. Arguments have been raised both in

relation to the conceptualisation of identity, but also in relation to its empirical applications.

One of the main critiques addressed to the constructionist approach is that it is believed to have destroyed the rationale for talking about identities (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). The authors argue that identities in the post-modern perspective are too ambiguous and 'infinitely elastic' and that in its current understanding, the concept of 'identity' is incapable of performing serious analytical work: "If identity is everywhere, then it is nowhere" (p.1). Georgiou also feels that the concept became an increasingly popular term precisely because it "could be adjusted to fit the various meanings granted to it" (Georgiou, 2006, p.39). In the author's view, social sciences need to re-consider this rather flat vocabulary and to cease subsuming so many meanings to just one term (ibid.).

In addition, Brubacker and Cooper (2000) deem the social-constructivist view to be only a cliché as in reality there has been no complete move from essentialism to constructivism. Often the two perspectives appear mixed reflecting

> [...] the tension between the constructivist language that is required by academic correctedness and the foundationalist or essentialist message that is required if appeals to "identity" are to be effective in practice (p.6)

Furthermore, there are authors who discuss the concept's analytical power. Many researchers were firm believers in identity's power to explain and predict different social phenomena. This was perhaps even more the case in the field of migration and ethnic identity studies: e.g. explaining differences in social mobility or school achievement between distinct ethnic groups. This approach can however be a rather slippery path as it may contribute to nothing more than re-enforcing the belief in essentialising identities and also risks becoming a veiled form of racism. Consequently other scholars note that in spite of the concept's descriptive power, one should not expect it to be a powerful predictor in social research (Denis-Constant, 1995; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000)

Moreover, an increasing number of voices tend to signal difficulties in engaging with the concept of identity in empirical research. On one hand this is a direct consequence of the ambiguity surrounding the concept. Social researchers are bound to answer a pressing question in relation to how is identity to be measured empirically: what aspects of identity need to be included

in the measurement to ensure relevance, while also avoiding an all-inclusive but meaningless viewpoint?

On the other hand, there are also concerns about the reliability of the concept as a variable in empirical research: if identity has become fragmented and dynamic, then would it still be a useful concept and a reliable variable to be used in social research?

As many questions yet remain to be answered, it becomes evident that while 'identity' is still very much a vital concept in social sciences, it is not without its own intricacies. There is yet no single, clear definition of identity and the concept tends to acquire new meanings in different instances of its use. In spite of the multiple difficulties in coming to an agreement about the meanings of the concept, I argue that eliminating the term 'identity' (together with other contested concepts) from the vocabulary of social sciences would render these sciences quite theoretically poor. Therefore what remains to be seen is not 'if', but rather 'how' can social research engage this key term in a creative manner.

Identity and symbolic boundaries

One of the most prominent attempts to address some of the challenges raised by efforts to conceptualise identity is the 'boundaries paradigm' proposed by Fredrik Barth. He brings to the fore the idea that we need to depart from the traditional anthropological understanding of culture and ethnicity as fixed entities made up of essentialising traits and to opt for a new understanding of identities as boundary-making processes.

Barth (1969) argues that the attribute of 'sharing a certain culture' was given a central importance in the definition of an ethnic group: ethnic groups were different simply because they were believed to be culturally different. Thus boundaries between groups were unproblematic because they merely signified the existing cultural differences between the groups. One of the main challenges posed by such an approach to ethnic identities and cultures is that it operates with a rather static vision of culture and identity which are preserved in isolation from other groups. Barth views that the issues of inter-ethnic contact and interdependence tend to be ignored in this perspective and no explanation is provided as to why cultures may still persist (or, on the contrary, change) under various circumstances.

The author thus argues that by focusing on the boundary as a powerful identifier in discourses and, more importantly, on the boundary-making process, identity acquires a relational dimension which will replace the traditional view of cultures and identities as isolated. Moreover, while culture was envisaged as a set of items which members of an ethnic group possess, Barth tends to militate for a more flexible understanding of culture and belonging which would allow us to understand why individuals who may seem quite dissimilar tend to assign themselves to the same group. While Barth does not deny the importance of cultural features, the author feels that several cultural traits are selected by members of a particular group (while other traits may be ignored) and become markers of identity as emblems of difference (p.14). Thus Barth accentuates that it is not the cumulative set of traits (which are said to form a culture) that are of key importance in defining membership (and identity), but rather the choices that individuals make: the traits which they select as key markers of their belonging.

Barth also sees in this new approach a way of addressing the multiple difficulties in defining identity: by focusing the analysis on the boundaries of a group[6] rather than specifically on the cultural content delimited by them, the object of investigation becomes much clearer. Rather than striving to find the similarities as a set of static cultural features which all members of a certain group posses, one should rather focus on the discourses of difference. According to Barth, this allows us to envisage how very different individuals may show allegiance to the same group (and its shared culture).

This avenue of thought initiated by Barth has been continued since then by many famous scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman and Abner Cohen. Bauman (1990) for example develops further the Barthian spectrum of ideas and underlines the role of 'the Other' in the construction of who we are. Bauman (op. cit.) defines the 'we' (or the in-group) as the space to which we belong and where we feel secure. On the opposite, 'they' represents the group(s) to which someone cannot or does not wish to belong (p.40). Bauman argues that both the in-group and out-group are inseparable in the process of symbolisation of our identities.

Other authors have also embraced aspects from Barth's paradigm and have engaged theoretically and empirically with the concept of boundary. In his book *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), Cohen argues that the substance of a particular structure "may be largely constituted by its

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[6] Barth refers to the ethnic group in particular.

symbolization of the community's boundaries" (p.50). Moreover, he argues that people become aware of a community through this symbolic expression and affirmation of its boundaries (p.50). Thus, 'community' seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference (p.12) and the border becomes of key importance.

While Cohen argues that the boundaries only act to highlight awareness of the content, Schlesinger (1987 cited in Morley and Robins, 1995, p.46) adopts a more radical approach and argues that the boundary (and not the cultural reality within those borders) becomes the critical factor for defining the ethnic group.

Bourdieu (1991) further argues that the boundary cannot be solely understood as a by-product of intrinsic cultural difference, but more importantly the boundary itself produces cultural difference. Both Jenkins (1997) and Sanders (2002) echo this view and emphasise the fact that that boundaries are not mere markers of difference, but rather a function of groupness (Jenkins, 1997, p.11).

In his book *Ethnic minorities and the media: changing cultural boundaries* (2000a), Cottle also highlights the importance of borders. The book presents findings of various empirical studies carried out in the field of ethnic minority media and representation of ethnic minorities in the media. The volume places a strong emphasis on the role of boundaries in the study of identity and, particularly in relation to exclusionary politics and the media.

Neumann (1999) also supports the usefulness of the concept of boundaries in identity research and points towards another great merit of the Barthian paradigm namely that it managed to drive identity research outside the sphere of psychology and into the area of social interaction. This allowed identities to be conceived as dynamic processes shaped in and through interactions with significant others.

Among the most recent studies which place a strong emphasis on the role of the boundaries and markers in the construction of (ethnic) identities one can note the key contributions of Castles and Miller (1998), Madianou (2005), Georgiou (2006) and Mavrommatis (2006). These scholars also highlight the subjective character of cultural differences between group and argue that such differences are constructed as "imagined cultural juxtapositions between themselves and others" (Mavrommatis, 2006, p.508).

While there is a wide spectrum of work which is built on the idea of borders as key markers of identity, the anthropology of the borders proposed by

Barth is strongly criticised by some of scholars in identity studies. On the one hand several authors disapprove of Barth's attempt to distinguish between ideas and values (i.e. the content of identity) on the one side and structure on the other (Louis Dumont, 1967 cited in Sollors, 1996) or between the vessel and the content (Abner Cohen, 1974 cited in Solors, 1996). These authors argue that the disassociation between content and boundary is artificial and therefore impracticable in social research.

These critiques are indeed justified as it would not be possible to conceptualise identity by focusing exclusively on the borders and completely disregarding the content enclosed within these boundaries. However, I argue that by approaching identity from a relational perspective and by focusing on the negotiation of symbolic boundaries one does not necessarily attempt a separation between border and content. By drawing lines and borders between 'us' and 'them' people and groups do not simply produce empty shells: these new spaces of belonging are filled with meaning and content. They become relevant markers in their identity discourses.

Another soft spot in Barth's theory is signalled by Talal Asad (1972 cited in Solors, 1996). The author points out that the boundary approach in the study of identities fails to explain the reasons why people may want to create and reinforce borders:

> Is it a primordial trait according to which human beings want to distance themselves from others, create and maintain boundaries, even when the area that's enclosed by these boundaries appears to be, at least from a structural view, identical? (cited in Solors, 1996, p.xxv)

Mary Douglas' fascinating book *Purity and Danger* (1966) provides us with a key argument which helps answer the question raised by Talal Asad. In her book she discusses the intriguing anthropology of dirt and points towards the need to fight dirt by introducing differences which may not occur naturally and which are meant to establish the order in our environment. Extrapolating to the topic of identity construction this would imply that while sometimes the differences between the in-group and out-group may not be 'visible' or easy to trace, they will need to be created in order for the groups to highlight their distinctiveness.

Bauman also sees the tracing of boundaries as necessary. For him, the 'us' and the 'them' are nothing else but two sides of the same coin that could not exist without the other. Denis-Constant (1995) furthermore argues that the relational facet of identity is an important aspect. He notes that while identity

tends to be a rather ambiguous notion, "the concept acquires meaning 'from what it is not', namely 'from the Other'" (p.5). Therefore sameness needs 'elseness' to exist (ibid.).

In conclusion, boundary creation and boundary-maintenance are critical in the process of order creation in our environment. The 'us' and the 'them' are essential for defining who we are through our belonging in groups.

The key advantage of this approach is that it enables us to eliminate to a certain extent the ambiguity surrounding the concept of 'identity', thus addressing one of the key gaps in identity studies. Rather than focusing obsessively on tracing all the various realities that make up the content of a particular identity, this paradigm proposes a shift of attention towards the symbolic borders between groups, in order to see how individuals and groups negotiate their identities in diverse social contexts and in relation to 'Others'.

This relational view of identity thus enables social researchers to actively engage with the concept in empirical research. By investigating the process of shaping the contours, researchers can also unravel the 'content' of a group's identity: the content in this approach is hence not an exhaustive account of a series of essentialising features of a group's identity. The content in this respect refers rather to a set of characteristics and features that the group identifies as relevant in relating with other groups and in negotiating their identity spaces. Hence, the great merit of this approach is that it eliminates the perpetual obstacles in operationalising the concept of identity in empirical research.

Methodologically this perspective challenged the traditional research avenues and allowed for innovative ways of looking at identity. It signalled the need to look at identity construction from a relational perspective: getting people to talk about themselves and about others and also about themselves through the eyes of others.

In conclusion, an 'anthropology of the borders' has deep implications both at the theoretical as well as the empirical level. The border allows us to conceive identity as relational. Identity is thus no longer 'a statement', but rather a process of negotiation, of tracing the borders. These borders are not fixed, but rather continuously constructed through interaction with significant Others.

The challenges as well as the advantages brought about by this approach to studying identity from a border perspective made this strand of studies increasingly attractive to identity researchers in the recent years. However it needs to be noted that whether we conceive identity as content or as relation, the term can never perform as a typical, unproblematic predictor in

social research, a variable that we can easily 'throw' in a statistical regression, factor analysis or other quantitative data analysis procedure.

Researchers perhaps need to take a step back and focus more on the very process of construction and negotiation of borders and identities. It is the symbolic negotiation at the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' that is truly relevant for our process of identity construction. The present study engages critically with the paradigm of the borders as it aims to point out how relevant (if at all) are the Others in the construction of Romanianness within the online diasporic community in Ireland.

Discourses and narratives, contexts and performances

An important idea has emerged from the previous paragraphs and it points to the fact that the cultural identity of a group should not necessarily be understood as the set of unique cultural features of those making up that particular group. This vision of identity contributes to nothing more than itemising cultural artefacts and essentialising cultural identities and borders.

Post-modernists insist on the fact that (ethnic) identities change throughout time due to the fact that they are dynamic processes, and not static realities (Hall, 1996; Jeffres, 2000; Riggnis, 1992; Bacon, 1999; Goulbourne and Solomos, 2003; Downing and Husband, 2005; Rutter and Tienda, 2005 etc.). Hence, boundaries need to be viewed as flexible rather than as fixed, therefore allowing us to grasp the dynamic aspects of the identity construction process. Mandaville (2001) notes that one can easily fall into essentialism when trying to map identities by their content, rather than perceiving them as socio-political processes involving "dialogue, negotiation and debate as to 'who we are' and, moreover, what it means to be 'who we are'" (p.170).

These aspects have prompted several authors to argue that perhaps the best way to understand identity is to approach it as a lived experience. Aksoy and Robins (2003) mention for example that identity emerges from the multiplicity of people's implications, engagements and interactions with the social world (p.373). Charles Tilly also feels that identity may be understood as a social actor's experience of a category, tie, role, networks, group or organisation, coupled with a public representation of that experience (Tilly, 1996 cited in Brubaker and Cooper, 2000).

Thus, the question that emerges at this stage is how is the link created from individual stories to group identity? Schlesinger (1987) provides us with some clues when he argues that identity needs to be seen as an emergent aspect of collective action (cited in Morley & Robins, 1995). From this perspective identity becomes a system of social relations and representations as well as negotiations.

In a similar vein with Foucault (1972) who points out that culture needs to be understood as a discourse that is constructed and maintained within power relations, Barker and Galasinski (2001) also argue for a concept of 'culture' that is not viewed as an essence but rather as a continually shifting description of ourselves and others. In their opinion, this discourse of 'us' and 'them' is produced at the intersection between vectors of resemblance and distinction (:30). Cultural identity thus appears no longer as merely a consensus, as a commonality, but also as a "zone of contestation in which competing meanings and descriptions of the world have fought for ascendancy" (p.56).

Similarly, Abdelal et al. (2006) mention that, when focusing on identities, it is also very relevant to understand the process of contestation inherent to any identitarian discourse. In the authors' words this refers to "the degree of agreement within a group over the content of the shared identity" (p.3). Several authors also note that post-modern identities emerge as evanescent products of multiple and competing discourses (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Denis-Constant, 1995). Abdelal et al. (2006) argue that these discourses are the products of social and political actions (and also the basis of further social and political actions). Therefore, the issue of power becomes important to the process of identity construction implying that while some of the voices and competing discourses will become mainstreamed, others tend to be marginalised. However, it needs to be considered that identity is not only the result of the existing structure of power relations in groups or society, but at the same time it becomes itself a weapon in the struggle for power (Denis-Constant, 1995).

Furthermore, several scholars strongly support the idea of researching identities as narratives. Somers (1994) for example argues that the use of narratives in social research is not a new trend and, even more importantly, it is not specific to identity studies, but it is rather embedded in an emerging tradition within the social sciences of seeing social life as storied. Referring to existing research in the field, Somers adds that we need to understand the fact that

people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives. (p.613-4)

Therefore the author feels that the narrative approach to identity allows researchers to incorporate into the concept of identity, dimensions such as time, space, and relationality. Hence the context becomes of key importance (Brah et al. 1999; Ryan, 2007; Sanders, 2002) as the process of setting boundaries between Us and the Others always takes place within particular historical and social contexts (Georgiou, 2006, p.43).

From the arguments presented so far it emerges that identities are not simply 'existing out there', but they are created and re-created through shared experiences, interactions and narratives (Cornell and Hartmann, 1997; Bacon, 1999; Downing and Husband, 2005).

More than 'listening' to various voices, it is also important to capture how these narratives are performed and how they gain legitimacy in the public space. In his book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman brings forward the idea of dramaturgy into the social sciences as he argues that a person's identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed in relation to the others. Therefore for Goffman, the 'audience' ('the witness' to the identity performance game) is absolutely key when it comes to analysing the shaping of these identities. While Goffman's analysis has focused on the individual identities, Stuart Hall (1994 [1992]) applies the concept of performance to the study of cultural identities as he refers to identity as a staged performance: 'playing the identity game'. Many other recent studies highlight the importance of understanding identity as performance (Werbner, 2003; Madianou, 2005; Georgiou, 2006). Georgiou (2006) for example distinguishes between a certain identity and its performance, e.g. performing Jewishness is not the same thing as being a Jew. This translates into the fact that by mapping the discourses one does not really discover what it means to 'be' from a certain group (e.g. Romanian, orthodox, gypsy etc.), but rather how one 'becomes' a member of that particular group through performance.

This brings an important aspect into discussion as it highlights the fluidity of identities and how (in line with Goffman's argument) audiences have a

significant impact on the performance (e.g. Romanianness may be performed differently in various contexts). In conclusion, it is important to look beyond the conception that identity is a single homogenous discourse, and rather to listen to the multitude of voices which are part of the performance and the diversity of performances specific to various social contexts.

1.3 Drawing boundaries and negotiating spaces of belonging: shaping identities in the migratory context

The debate over migration and ethnic minorities has rarely taken place in the absence of key concepts such as integration, culture, identity, 'us' vs. 'them', 'home' vs. 'host' societies etc. Thus in the field of migration studies, research on identity and belonging has flourished over the last two decades. This is, according to Mandaville (2001), probably because diasporas often lead a more intense search and negotiation of identity due to the fact that they are experiencing separation from the 'natural' setting of the homeland. Rutter and Tienda (2005) echo the same idea as they state that people tend to experience a stronger sense of sharing a common nationality and ethnic identity after migration occurs mainly because the physical relocation to a culturally different environment triggers self-awareness through cultural contact (p.55).

This final section of the chapter sets out to critically explore the literature constructed around some of the key concepts relevant to identity research in the migration context, namely cultural identity, ethnicity and diasporic identity. There is yet no consensus about a clear line of demarcation between these notions, and quite often they have been used interchangeably. For this particular reason a critical investigation of the uses that these terms have been put to is crucial.

Identities: cultures and ethnicities

The concept of culture shared the same frantic history as the notion of 'identity'. Not so far back from the present cultures were conceived as immutable realities, which were strongly localised in a way that was almost organically bounded to territories (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Morley, 2001; Kennedy and Roudometof, 2001). Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) argue that the anthropological tradition often assumed that cultures needed to be studied as unitary and as entities that were organically related to, and fixed within, territories (p.305).

One of the most notable contributions to the study of culture comes from Clifford Geertz. An advocate of symbolic anthropology, Geertz defines culture as a web of meaning from which people draw their practices, their attitudes and the

ways of relating with life (Geertz, 1973). Culture thus encompasses a set of symbols which are inherited from one generation to another and which play a vital role in people's ways of communicating and decoding their everyday experiences. In a similar vein, Bourdieu (1977) discusses the concept of 'habitus' which he defines as those aspects of culture that become perpetuated through socialisation of individuals into a certain set of practices which become 'structuring structures'.

A similar line of argument is also pursued by other scholars who note that culture impacts on how groups attribute meaning to their experiences and objects that they encounter everyday (Woodward, 1997; Wise 2000; Månsson, 2008). Thus culture appears as an inherent aspect of a certain group's identity as it embodies practices which become standardised through everyday interactions over a long period of time. Culture appears almost as the stable core of a group's identity, it is the aspect that gives the group stability and coherence in time, while also providing the individuals with a framework for interpreting their experiences.

While there is no denying that socialisation into a particular set of norms and practices does have a long-lasting effect on the members of a group, these definitions only present a truncated image of the culture of a group.

The seminal work of Stuart Hall contributed to a breakthrough in the field of cultural studies. For Hall (1994 [1992]) culture needs to be conceptualised in terms of 'belonging' and 'becoming' rather than merely possessing a certain cultural inventory. Furthermore, Hall argues that we need to view cultural identity as a series of points of similarity as well as difference rather than as a homogeneous shared culture - a sort of collective 'one true self' (Hall, 1990, p.223). Abu-Lughod (1991 cited in Hannerz, 1996) also insists that culture needs to be considered as an essential tool for making the other. This highlights the fact that culture is an essential identifier in relation to the others, a marker of difference.

Closely linked to the concept of culture is that of ethnicity, which many definitions describe as a sense of commonality, of sharing particular features with the other members of the group. Originally stemming from the Greek concept of 'ethnos' (which means 'nation'), ethnicity, according to Cornell and Hartmann (1997), does not refer to a political unity, but to the unity of persons of common blood or descent. The authors point to the fact that in practice, descent from a common homeland often serves as a broad assertion of common ancestry as it represents a metaphor for kinship.

While many definitions of ethnicity have gravitated towards the idea of shared descent as an intrinsic feature of the ethnic group, there are also scholars who point to the fact that common ancestry needs to be understood in a more flexible and subjective manner. The German sociologist Max Weber (1978) defined ethnic groups as constituted upon subjective belief in their common descent due to the "similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration" (p.389). It becomes evident that what Weber is hinting at is the fact that besides their shared descent (biology), history and traditions, ethnicities are also constructed realities based on self-identification. Constructed on Weber's interpretive paradigm, more and more definitions of ethnic identity go beyond the mere mention of descent and argue for a more complex conceptualisation of ethnicity, one that takes into consideration the importance of shared cultural features (Hall, 1994 [1992). These shared characteristics may refer to, just to name a few, language, myths and habits, shared histories, memories, customs and traditions, sentiments and values, religion, feeling for 'place' (Yinger, 1985; Hall, 1994 [1992]; Sreberny, 2000; Goulbourne and Solomos, 2003). Citing previous research, Greve and Salaff (2005) also add other key features such as demeanour, style of dress, particular tastes for food and consumer goods etc. which may become symbols of identification with an ethnic group (:10).

Barth (1969) alongside many other more recent studies (Stack, 1981; Yinger, 1985; Hylland Eriksen, 1993; Giddens, 1991; Riggins, 1992; Jenkins 1997; Castles and Miller, 1998; Jeffres, 2000; Downing and Husband, 2005) argues that ethnicity involves to a great extent issues of awareness (of commonalities) and perception (by others). However, as Jenkins (1997) points out, these distinctions between internal and external definitions (i.e. defining ourselves vs. being defined by others) are mainly analytical distinctions as in the course of daily interactions these two apparently separate discourses find themselves in a complex interplay.

There are also several attempts to define ethnicity as a resource which people use "in the negotiation of social groupings and borders, associating themselves with certain groups or contexts and dissociating from others" (Mirdal and Ryynänen-Karjalainen, 2004, p.31). This approach emphasises the fact that ethnic identity is not something that is prescribed to a group member, but it is also actively constructed and mobilised by groups in different contexts.

If ethnicity may be manoeuvred in order to maximise the personal or the group's resources ethnicity thus becomes a strategy based upon choice and informed by a calculus of advantage (van den Berghe, 1981 in Cohen, 1985, p.105). Alia and Bull (2005) also imply that claims to particular ethnic identity tend to vary in relation to multiple factors such as politics, fashion, personal preferences etc. (p.2). Markowitz (1997) even talks about an (ethnic) identity-shopping process (cited in Elias et al., 2007).

Conversely Jenkins (1997) argues that by seeing ethnicity as a resource or a strategy, many scholars end up completely disregarding the idea that ethnicity may, in certain contexts, become stigmatising[7].

Ethnicity today is the most salient system of categorisation (Downing and Husband, 2005) and needs to be analysed in the context of discourses of power (Bourdieu, 1991; Jenkins, 1997). This refers in Bourdieu's view to "the power of imposing a vision of the social world" by establishing "meaning and a consensus about meaning, and in particular about the identity and the unity of the group" (p.221).

The literature review thus shows that there is quite a variety of ways in which ethnicity may be understood and engaged with in empirical studies. Some of the first scholars to focus on the topic of ethnicity saw it as a 'primordial attachment' (Geertz, 1963 cited in Castles and Miller, 1998). However, this approach has been criticised for leading further to essentialising identities and not allowing for a dualism to exist, i.e. having more than one identity at once. In addition, ethnicity cannot be conceived as a preset and stable characteristic of a person, something "implanted, like a microchip at birth", but rather as a continuous process of identity construction (Downing & Husband, 2005, p.14).

Summing these arguments, Ryan (2007) concludes more research needs to be carried out in relation to the process of self-identification and, more importantly, "how people actively engage with notions of their own ethnic identity" (p.418). Moreover she argues that research on self-identification needs to be accompanied by a desire to understand how outsiders' define the group as well, and moreover how the outsiders' definitions may influence processes of ethnic self-identification.

Cornell and Hartmann (1997) seem to agree that perhaps no single definition or approach to ethnicity will ever bring the desired clarity and empirical operationability to the concept and at the same time be overwhelmingly

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[7] This aspect will be further discussed in a subsequent chapter the context of the factors that impact of the formation of migrant, ethnic and diasporic identities.

accepted by all scholars. This prompts some of the scholars to ask the question whether ethnicity is not just a new way of saying something old, by re-igniting the same debates surrounding (cultural) identities (Glazer&Moynihan, 1975, p.1).

Georgiou (2006) mentions that many scholars have abandoned ethnicity as a concept within cultural studies and sociology (p.46). Steinberg (1981 cited in Castles and Miller, 1998) for example calls for a rejection of the concept of ethnicity and dismisses it as nothing more than a myth or nostalgia which will not survive in large-scale industrial societies. Several authors seem to argue that the rebuffing of ethnicity has mainly been a consequence of the fact that ethnicity has been mistakenly considered synonymous with 'minority' and, for this particular reason, ethnic groups have been assumed to have a marginalised role in the majority society, thus rendering these communities prone to isolation into sectarian communities (Georgiou, 2006; Riggins, 1992; Alia and Bull, 2005).

Nevertheless, there are also numerous scholars that defend the maintenance of ethnicity in the language of social sciences. Glazer and Moynihan (1975) argue that individuals need an identity that is smaller than the State and larger than the family and they feel that ethnicity accomplished this key role. Georgiou (2006) also mentions that the concept of ethnicity has been particularly attractive in defining and addressing cultural difference in multicultural societies in a way that is not dominated by the biological differences emphasised by race (Georgiou, 2006, p.45). Regardless of how it is defined and operationalised in various studies, Cornell and Hartmann (1997) conclude that ethnicity is nonetheless a very important identity marker as it constitutes one of the "most common categories that contemporary human beings use to organise their ideas about who they are, to evaluate their experiences and behaviour, and to understand the world around them" (p.12).

To be, or not to be, that is the question: a migrant? an 'ethnic'? or diasporic?

Vermeulen (2001) notes that during the 1990s interest in the concept of culture has been resuscitated as the consequences of globalisation and migration became more noticeable. The author argues that initially the notion of 'culture' has been applied crudely to refer to the "characteristics of the immigrant group" (p.22). Thus, together with 'the ethnics', 'the migrant others' with their varied cultural backgrounds become more salient while the host society culture

tends to be regarded as 'the standard' against which migrant's cultures are compared, rather than perceived as an alternative culture.

The literature review process has revealed that there is a great degree of overlap between various conceptualisations of 'identity' and scholars sometimes use them interchangeably without building a strong argumentation for their decision to do so. Particularly in empirical studies, immigrant groups have been described interchangeably as 'communities', 'ethnic groups' or 'diasporas' without questioning whether these labels attached to a particular group are in accordance with the groups' own feelings about their belonging.

The term 'migrant' refers to a very broad category and it is applied to persons who leave their usual place of residence in order to settle in a different place. Thus, this label refers rather to a geographical relocation, and bears no direct indication as to the group's cultural identity.

Berger and Mohr (1989) however draw our attention to a very important issue as they argue that the word 'migrant' tends to have a collective meaning rather than simply define a person whose origins are in a different geographical area. The authors portray the reality of a migrant worker in the 1960s and 1970s in their book *A Seventh Man. The Story of a Migrant Worker in Europe*:

> The migrant workers have a different language, a different culture and different short-term interests. They are immediately identifiable – not as individuals, but as a group (or a series of national groups). As a group they are at the bottom of every scale: wages, type of work, job security, housing, education, purchasing power (p.139)

Therefore they seem to argue that 'being a migrant' refers to more than a geographical relocation, but also to 'being different' within the host society. This aspect is supported by other scholars and they note that the 'immigrant' label seems to be applied to the most salient group(s) in a society at a particular moment rather than to everybody who has indeed relocated to a different country.

For example Braham (1982) notices, during the late 1970s and early 1980s the word 'immigrant' was generally used as synonym for 'black', regardless of whether they were indeed 'migrants' or born into the UK. This understanding of the term 'migrant' thus excluded larger groups of other white migrants living in Britain (p.268). Recent research in the Irish context (Byrne, 2011) points us in the same direction as findings indicate that while white immigrants originating from English-speaking countries (the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, New Zealand) are not perceived as 'immigrants', while

people from other countries (in particular the new EU member states from Eastern Europe) are labelled as 'migrants'.

This highlights the fact that the meanings associated with the concept of 'migrant', are far from simple and unproblematic, but rather subjective and socially constructed. Furthermore this will have an impact on the process of identity construction. On the one hand, some individuals may find it very hard to shake off the 'migrant' label in spite of the fact that they have never been migrants themselves (as is the case of the second and even third generation).

Also, since identity is always constructed at the intersection of self-ascription to a group as well as recognition by others, it may become very challenging for several categories of migrants to be recognised as such and to construct their identity discourses. As it emerges from recent research findings this may be the case for migrants originating from English-speaking countries who may find their spectrum of available opportunities for identification as migrants limited by the public discourse.

At the same time other groups that have been living for a considerable number of years in a particular country and have become naturalised may find themselves tossed in the same category with the newly arrived migrants solely because of their foreign origin. Thus, regardless of their significant efforts to integrate (and even assimilate) their identity narratives of belonging to the adoptive country will come into conflict with the ascribed identity of 'not belonging'.

Hence, 'migrant identity', far from being a simple marker of geographical relocation, needs to be understood as a complex discourse that takes shape between individual narratives and the host society's discourse of recognition.

Having already discussed the multiple intricacies which characterise concepts such as 'culture', 'ethnicity', and 'migrant identity', it is now crucial to examine the meanings associated with the notion of 'diaspora', a concept which, according to Sreberny (2000) has become a key term in the contemporary debates about immigration and identity.

Safran (1991) gives probably the most well-known account of what classic diaspora is. The author points out that these diasporas: involve dispersal from an original place; have a collective memory and a vision of their homeland; feel that perfect acceptance and integration into the host society is not attainable; contemplate the return to the homeland; are committed to maintain and restore the original homeland; and feel a strong ethnic group consciousness

based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, and a belief in a common fate (p.83-84).

This illustrates that diasporas were often defined in strict correlation with their so-called ancestral home, as the home territory was deemed as crucial for their identity (Marienstras, 1989). However, while Safran's definition may indeed constitute a reflection of what Armstrong (1976) calls 'archetypal diasporas', these formations are very different from the contemporary diasporas or, as Clifford (1994) names them, the 'quasi diasporas'. According to Clifford (1994) diasporas tend to experience inbetweenness, a lived tension generated by experiencing "separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (p.311).

Thus, many authors feel that the classic meaning of diaspora (as defined by Safran) tends to be rather restrictive, referring only to very few groups (in particular Jewish or ancient Greek). The modern understanding of diasporas includes a great variety of groups whose circumstances are quite different (Reis, 2004). However it is worth noting that between the 'old' and the 'new' diasporas there are also many similarities which need to be highlighted.

When conceptualising diasporas as communities that live in a country other than their country of origin, it is implied that these diasporic communities have experienced 'dispersal' from homeland. However, as Smart (1987) argues this dispersal is not in all cases a life-death matter. Thus in many cases the decision to migrate may have been the result of deciding to take advantage of an opportunity rather than the outcome of a forced circumstance (as was the case of classic diasporas). Nevertheless, the author points out that, regardless of how the departure from homeland has occurred, this separation will always be experienced as an exile. This is mainly due to the fact that, according to Smart (1987), the sense of exile becomes a constant in the lives of people who move out of their own culture and settle in a foreign country. In addition, Sheffer (1986) also notes that in the case of contemporary ethnic diasporas 'expulsion' or 'exile' from the homeland may employ a more metaphorical connotation than the dramatic dispersal experienced by the archetypal diasporas.

Safran (1991) argues that the collective memory of the homeland is also a defining element of classic diasporas. For many of the contemporary diasporas, homeland is the essential point of identification. Their individual memories of 'home' are shared, constructed and reconstructed through public discourse. Moreover, due to the shared memories of 'home', the homeland becomes the key common denominator against which they make comparisons

and they evaluate (and re-evaluate) their current situation in the host country. Some scholars argue that it is particularly this shared interest in the homeland that holds modern diasporas together (Hiller and Franz, 2004).

In his definition, Safran (1991) also points out that diaspora's relationship with the host country is equally important. 'Old' diasporas are expected to deem integration (or rather assimilation) into the host society as an impossible task. Sheffer (1986) further adds that diasporas tend to assume a minority group role in the country of destination as they strive to "preserve their ethnic, or ethnic-religious identity and communal solidarity" (p.9-10). Furthermore Sheffer feels that it is this type of solidarity that helps diasporic people shape and maintain their social networks of contacts which will be key for their continued activism and involvement in the homeland.

Studies on contemporary diasporas on the other hand show a wide array of integration strategies ranging from minimal involvement with the host society, to situations when assimilation is the desired outcome. While Safran's definition seems to neglect particularly the transnational dimension of a diaspora, Moorti (2003) insists that the diasporic optic needs to be understood as 'a sideways glance' because it has the ability to glimpse at two or more worlds and also to move in different directions at once (p.355). Thus, for diasporic people the idea of multiple affiliations and multiple homes needs to be accepted. Kumar Sahoo (2006) also blames the traditional way in which loyalty towards a nation state was perceived as it assumed a conflict between diasporic discourses of home and host. Furthermore, several scholars note that it may be the case that diaspora does not perceive the two discourses as contradictory (Sheffer, 1995), mainly because they tend to negotiate their identities beyond the ethnic identity vs. assimilation debate (Tsagarousianou, 2004). Hence, we can conclude that diasporic everyday life "is informed by (and informs) more than one culture" (Georgiou, 2006, p.4).

As it emerges from Safran's definition, another point of difference between the 'old' and the 'new' diasporas seems to be related to the desire to return. However, while this 'longing to return' to the original homeland may be a key feature of the classic diasporas, it is important to note that even some of the modern diasporas contemplate the possible return to the homeland. The circumstances may however be completely different. While the archetypal diasporas desire to return may originate in the genuine sense of loss following the traumatic dispersal from their homelands, in the case of the contemporary diasporas the desire to return may be linked with various factors, including

personal rationales, negative experiences in the host country (such as racism and discrimination etc.), and positive changes in the situation in the homeland. Perceived integration barriers in the country of destination may make diasporas keep open the possibility of a return, without necessarily acting upon any such initiatives. At the same time, the context in the homeland (e.g. a perceived improvement in the life conditions) tends to play a key role in the decision to return. It may be argued that for the 'new' diasporas, the decision to return lies at the intersection between the initial reasons for migrating and the actual contexts in the country of origin and that of destination.

Another important point made by Safran in his definition of diasporas is that classical diasporas feel a strong commitment to maintain and restore the original homeland. It may be argued that, although they may not feel charged with a 'messianic role' in relation to the homeland, contemporary diasporas often feel that their contributions clearly make an impact on the country (e.g. by means of remittances; through commitment to improve the image of the homeland abroad etc.). Thus, modern diasporic groups (just like their classic counterparts) may become involved in projects of maintenance, restoration and reconstruction of the homeland (Rose, 2010).

Finally, it is assumed that (according to Safran's definition) classic diasporas develop strong ethnic group consciousness "based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, and the belief in a common fate" (Safran, 1991, p.83-84). Generally speaking, all groups of migrants originating form the same country show various grades of group consciousness, ranging from very strong attachment to one's community, to rather weak awareness of themselves as a group. Therefore it is essential to avoid assigning a priori and routinely the 'diasporic label' to a particular migrant community.

Hence, the meaning of diasporas has changed considerably since the first diasporas have been documented. While the definition of diasporas proposed by Safran (1991) is quite restrictive and the relationship between contemporary diasporas and the homeland may also take forms other than those mentioned by Safran, some of the defining elements of archetypal diasporas are still relevant for defining the modern forms of diasporas. According to Wieviorka (2007) there is an ongoing process of creating new forms of diasporas which co-exist with old ones.

Furthermore, Safran's definition however clearly denotes the line of difference between a diasporic and a migrant community. Hence, diasporas are

not to be understood as immigrant communities which tend to be rather temporary and lack a particular group consciousness.

Moreover, while migrants may form a diaspora, the latter is not necessarily made up of people who have geographically re-settled, nor is it equivalent to a group of people of the same nationality. Laitin (1998) for example uses the phrase 'beached diasporas' to describe the situation of the Russian communities in the countries which were formally part of the Russian empire, thus casting a whole new and complex light upon the two apparently unproblematic concepts of 'home' and 'host' societies.

There are also several critiques raised by some of the scholars in relation to the concept of diaspora. According to Georgiou (2006), diaspora has been accused of reproducing the same essentialising tendencies of identity. Other authors fear that diaspora has become an increasingly elastic term which no longer bears value in the social sciences. They argue that the contemporary meaning of diaspora is very wide, thereby at the peril of covering "just about any type of existence away from the homeland" (Fludernik, 2003, p.xiii; Moorti, 2003).

Another criticism against the modern use of the term 'diaspora' highlights the fact that, due to the constant interplay between centre and periphery, diaspora has become simply an extension of the nation-state which, according to Soysal (2000), forces us to conceive these groups as bound to the homeland territory rather than acknowledging the existence of new forms of citizenship which are "no longer anchored in national collectives" (p.6 cited in Devlin Trew, 2010, p.542; and also Georgiou, 2006).

Moreover, while the homeland is nevertheless a fundamental referent used by diasporas in their identity discourses, Turner (2006) adds that the relationship between the diasporic group and the homeland is in no case habitual and that attraction of the homeland varies with different categories of diaspora population. The author argues that diasporic identities "depend upon how the relationships between emigrants and their country of origin are defined, maintained, activated and reproduced over time" (Turner, 2006, p.4). Furthermore Turner notes that new media play a key in this relationship[8]. Thus, rather than being taken for granted, the relationship with the homeland needs to be explored in depth in studies dealing with diasporic identities in order for the multiple nuances of this relationship to be captured.

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[8] This issue will be further analysed in a subsequent chapter.

One key aspect which emerges from the previous argument is that diasporas cannot be understood as homogenous groups, and that we should acknowledge the internally dividing differences which are sometimes neglected and concealed (Sökefeld and Schwalgin, 2000, p.3; but also Husband, 2005; Shi, 2005). The most notable factors that contribute to diversity among members of a diaspora include gender, class, age, political affiliation, place of origin, pattern of settlement etc.

Another important critique raised by several authors points out that the definition and discussion about diasporas has only taken place in relation to the home and/or the host society. Thus, the solution to this dilemma seems to lie in enlarging the meaning of ethnic or diasporic identities and emphasising the multiple and diverse ways in which groups relate to each other, rather than focusing strictly on the sub-ordinate relationship between mainstream society and diasporas or ethnic groups.

Among scholars who have discussed the utility of the concept of 'diaspora', there are also voices arguing in favour of the concept as it offers new possibilities for imagining and understanding identity as a process which is not bound to a certain place or nationality (Gilroy, 1997, p.304), "an intermediate concept between the local and the global that [...] transcends the national perspectives which often limit cultural studies" (Gillespie, 1995, p.6). Moreover Boyarin and Boyarin (1993) feel that one of the greatest advantages in focusing on diasporic cultural identities is that they are key illustrations of how it is possible to understand that cultures are not necessarily preserved in 'isolation' (absence of mixing), but rather by mixing itself (p.721 cited in Clifford, 1994, p.323).

In conclusion, one needs to engage with these critical elements and address these challenges before using the concept of diaspora in social research. Several authors seem to suggest that the way forward is to approach diaspora as a stance or a claim, a socio-political debate rather than as a bounded entity (Brubacker, 2005; Tsagarousianou, 2004). Also we should rather abandon the traditional conception of diaspora as a community displaced from an original home, and re-conceptualise it in terms of its multiple connections and links (Tsagarousianou, 2004) with home and the host society as well as multiple 'Others'.

Summary and conclusions

This chapter started by briefly highlighting some of the main approaches specific to migration research and it pointed out that while some researchers study migration at the macro level, others look in-depth at the grass-root level in order to comprehend such processes from an individual perspective. Also while some studies have focus on the root causes of migration, others point out its manifold implications, both at the individual level as well as at the economic, political, cultural and societal level.

The chapter also discussed the key approaches (or policy models) to migrants' incorporation in the receiving societies. Assimilation, one of the early theories of migrant incorporation into receiving societies implies that migrants need to abandon their so-called 'home culture' and, by giving up their cultural identities, they would fully embrace the culture of the host society. Gradually this approach has started to lose ground as more and more social scientists agree that while a certain degree of assimilation may be inherent in any integration process, complete assimilation can never be possible.

Existing studies indicate that migrants or migrant groups may choose to adopt the host society's culture to a greater or lesser extent. On the one hand, this points to the fact that 'assimilation' represents more than a model or a state-level policy, but also (and more importantly) an individual or group choice. This idea becomes particularly important when looking at ethnic or diasporic identity strategies. On the other hand, findings of the above-mentioned studies also show that even some of the diasporic groups which may pass as 'culturally similar' to the 'hosts' may identify themselves less with the host society than other diasporic groups would. This opens up the possibility that culture or racial identities do not necessarily act as barriers or enhancers of assimilation, and that we should rather look at other potential factors and explanations for migrants' (or migrant groups') decisions to morph to a greater or lesser extent into the native population.

Thus, an important aspect which emerged from the literature is that beyond any state-level policies in place, integration certainly entails a multitude of processes which take place at the individual (or group) level. Migrants' perspectives on what 'integration' means and how it is to be achieved may vary

significantly and this will have a strong impact on their choice of paths in accomplishing the process.

In relation to multiculturalism, the existing literature notes that while striving to address some of the main criticisms associated with assimilationism, this perspective has 'allowed' for the idea that migrants may retain their own culture (or at least elements from it). In the language of identity studies this translates into the fact that migrants have the opportunity to shape identities rather than be demanded to adopt the cultural identity of the host society.

However these approaches (assimilationism and multiculturalism) failed to convey a notion of boundary-less culture, a culture that is linked to a symbolic (and negotiated) rather than a geographical place. It is the transnational approach that indeed facilitates a view of migrants (and diasporas) as constant movers between here and there. Hence in spite of viewing migrants under the continuous spell of the homeland culture, we need to understand how migrants often adapt these cultural practices to the new context which is the host society. Transnationalism enables researchers to achieve a more insightful understanding of migration as continuous interactions across borders, rather than as a one-off, isolated event. Moreover it allows for a conceptualisation of identity as a hybrid construction, freed from the essentialist connotations of 'home' vs. 'host'.

This chapter also outlined the key approaches that shape the theoretical background to the study of identity. One key finding that emerges from the literature reviewed is that while the post-modern identity theory provides some key guidelines for understanding identity as a dynamic process of negotiation and performance, it is however far from becoming a panacea for the numerous challenges faced by identity scholars.

Post-modern identity tends to get criticised for being too ambiguous and torn between "hard" and "soft" meanings (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000), thus implicitly creating significant difficulties for empirical studies. Hence, the more radical social scientists call for the complete removal of the concept of identity from social science given its lack of clarity. On the other hand there are scholars who strongly defend the concept's potential for social research in spite of its un-refined shape, and look for creative ways in which they can move beyond these challenges and address the existing dilemmas.

In the great effort to surpass the main criticism associated with the concept, many scholars have adopted the pioneering idea proposed by Barth, a tradition which emphasises the role of the boundaries between groups as the

key spaces where identity is negotiated. The boundary is however not to be understood as fixed border traced around the contours of a particular group. The boundaries need to be conceptualised as fluid border-lines that get reconfigured in different contexts through discourse.

The final section of the chapter emphasised the idea that conceptualising identities in the migratory context is not necessarily a straightforward exercise. The existing literature indicates that important terms such as 'cultural identity', 'ethnic identity', 'migrant identity' and 'diasporic identity' are often used interchangeably or, at best, in an overlapping manner thus creating much confusion around their deployment in social studies.

It is indeed difficult to set clear demarcation lines between the realities described by each of these concepts. The notion of culture (which is the wider-ranging from these notions) was often torn between attempts to envision it as a territorially-bound static core of features or, on the other hand, as a non-homogenous dynamic everyday reality. These challenges have reflected in the ability to engage with this concept in empirical research.

Ethnicity was in many cases used as a proxy for culture in the context of migration studies. While the initial definitions of ethnicity focused on a set of shared features (descent as well as other cultural items such as language, beliefs etc.), further conceptualisations have emphasised the importance of employing a more flexible approach and referring to ethnicities as choices of self identification with a particular ethnic group. The key role played by 'the Others' in the process of shaping an ethnic identity was also highlighted. It was argued that 'the Others' are essential for identity in order to achieve public recognition.

Literature also points out that even the relatively straightforward concept of 'migrant' (which, at first glance, may simply refer to a geographical relocation) seems to be a socially defined category with fundamental implications on the range of available 'identity options'.

Last but not least, the concept of 'diaspora' is increasingly used by scholars to define a form of existence that takes place outside the national borders, but which is, nevertheless, linked to 'home'. In spite of the fact that the first definitions of the term referred to archetypal diasporas (e.g. Jews, Armenians etc.) who had fled their homeland as a consequence of traumatic experiences, the concept of diaspora has recently lent itself to more diverse and complex forms of communities. Nevertheless, between these 'old' and the 'newer' forms of diasporas there are also multiple similarities to be mentioned.

Taking into consideration the theoretical framework presented in this section, the present study focuses on mapping diasporic identity narratives by engaging with the constructivist perspective. This implies a flexible understanding of identity as a process that is negotiated in the everyday life and interactions of diasporic people. Following on the line of research opened by Barth and continued by Baumann and other scholars, this research places a strong emphasis on the processes of boundary creation and negotiation in the identity discourses as it examines the diasporic reflections around their identity and the identities of 'relevant Others'.

How groups define themselves especially in relation to other groups is important because it enables us to understand the key identifiers which become relevant for groups in their identity narratives. In other words it captures the choices that diasporic people make in terms of pledging their allegiance to certain groups while, at the same time, other groups become simply 'the Others'.

Chapter 2 - Of media and migration: inquiries into the role of media in the lives of the 'cultural others'

Outline of the chapter

Appadurai (1996) sees media and migration as "two major and interconnected phenomena, whose relationship with each other is the key to understanding the link between the global and the modern" (cited in Chan, 2005, p.336). The link between media and identity is also noted by many authors as they attribute mass media a key role in shaping, maintaining, reflecting and performing identities. Hence, it is understandable why, given the current debate on the topic of integration and the shaping of migrants' identities in the context of the transnational frame, research literature around the topic of media and migrants/ethnic minorities/diasporic identities has flourished across all social science disciplines.

However this has not always been the case according to Wood and King (2001). In their view for a long time the migration literature has been rather silent about the role of media as the main focus was on the economic implications of the phenomenon. At the same time, they point out that media studies have traditionally relied on causal explanations hence rendering themselves vulnerable to deterministic statements about the impact of media representations of diversity.

This chapter is aimed at reviewing existing scholarship built at the confluence of these major concepts which are 'media' and 'migration' while particularly reflecting on the shaping and negotiation of diasporic/ethnic identities.

Existing scholarship on the topic of ethnic minorities/diasporas/migration and the media can be classified in several broad categories. While some studies investigate the media diet of ethnic/diasporic media consumption, there is also a wide range of works which emphasise the role of these communities in producing their own media. Another particularly important topic is that of the representation of (cultural) diversity in the mass media (both in terms of content as well as in the structure of the workforce in the media sector). In conclusion, the endeavour to comprehend the importance of media in the lives of migrants and ethnic minorities needs to combine these strands of research.

The first section of the present chapter aims to discuss some key issues in relation to the media representations of migrants, ethnic minorities and diasporas. Several key themes seem to emerge from these portrayals of 'the cultural others' in the media.

The next section examines ethnic minorities and diasporas as audiences as well as producers of their media. Due to the fact that their hybrid identities are shaped at the intersection of two (or more) national cultures, minorities consume (or they are at least exposed to) media from more than one country. This renders them somewhat different from the typical audiences as they cannot be assigned to a single, homogenous 'national' frame. Therefore the meanings that they construct around media messages (especially in relation to media representations of diversity) need to be analysed in the context of their ethnic and diasporic identities construction. This section also discusses the involvement of these communities in the process of production of their own media and highlights some of the potential factors that may enhance or deter diasporas and ethnic minorities from getting involved in ethnic media production.

The final section of the chapter pays tribute to the role of media in the lives of migrants and diasporas. While there is a vast literature focusing on the role played by traditional media in relation to ethnic, migrants and diasporic communities, the importance of the internet in this regard is getting more and more recognition.

The chapter concludes by highlighting some of the main issues emerging from the review of literature on the topic and points towards several existing theoretical gaps in the field.

2.1   Media representations of cultural diversity

A Portrait of the ethnic as a Cultural Other

This direction of study is perhaps one of the earliest established, therefore a significant number of studies on the topic of media and migration has emerged from this strand of research. While it would be difficult to trace the origins of stereotyping of ethnic minorities, it appears that the famous and equally contested Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso is considered to have made the first attempt to frame stereotyping in a scientific way. In his book *L'Uomo Delinquente*, he argues that ethnic minorities possess the same characteristics as 'habitual delinquents' (Lombroso, 1876 cited in Alia & Bull, 2005). Hence, Alia & Bull (2005) conclude that "by the late nineteenth century the link between 'filth' and ethnic minorities was already well established" (p.14-15).

Later on, scholarly interest in the process of national identity construction highlighted the fact that national discourses are always constructed against the migrant/ethnic 'other'. Takacs (1999) notes that the main role of this discourse of exclusion is to "reconstitute the authority of the nation state by reaffirming the solidity and stability of national boundaries at the moment of their dissolution" (p.592). Hence, given the incontestable role played by media in disseminating the nationalist discourse as well as conferring it with authenticity, these exclusionary images and portrayals perpetually find their way to the media discourse. Kostarella (2007) exemplifies these aspects in her study on the representations of Turkey in the Greek press and argues that media have "acted as catalysts by emphasising the 'unitary state' myth and by encouraging fear of the 'other'" (:23). Furthermore, the author notes that media seem to play a key role in nationalist ideology, by appealing to racism and xenophobia.

It can easily be noted that media representations of migrants seem to follow invariably the logic of the 'us' vs. 'them', in-group vs. out-group opposition. Consequently, scholarship within this particular strand of research has been drawing greatly from the works of Barth (1969) and Bauman (1990), as well as the earlier theorisations of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination in the field of sociology and social psychology (Allport, 1954 and Tajfel, 1982 cited in Dijker, 1987).

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'Stereotype', a term which has constantly appeared conjoined with the concept of 'prejudice' can be generally understood as typified knowledge that we have about a particular group. In theory, stereotyping does not necessarily imply any negative connotation, as positive stereotypes can also be created.

Sibley (1999 [1995]) confers stereotyping an important role in the configuration of social space because, he argues, through stereotypes people impose distance from the groups which are perceived as 'others' (p.14), a process which tends to create 'landscapes of exclusion' (ibid.).

A critical look at research examining the portrayal of ethnic minorities and migrants in the mainstream media reveals that scholars have manifested a strong preference towards the study of news and towards text/print media. Moreover, it is worth noting that this thread of empirical works seems to produce astonishingly comparable conclusions regardless of the ethnic minority/diasporic or migrant group studied or the specific context analysed. Alia & Bull (2005) metaphorically conclude that what we see today is nothing but a 'rise of imputed filth' in the media representations of ethnic minorities and they further argue that this so-called 'demonisation' of ethnic minorities is only a way to divert attention from society's problems by blaming them "upon fictional others who are already on the periphery of society" (Alia & Bull, 2005, p.25, also Kostarella, 2007).

Most authors and policy makers are extremely critical of the perpetual demonisation and misrepresentation of migrants in mass media that has become a regular practice almost everywhere. Nevertheless, Cottle (2000) notes that, paradoxically, the most outrageous xenophobic and racist media representations are often found in the same societies that are "publicly committing to the ideals and practices of an inclusive multi-ethnic, multicultural society" (p.3). The author cites an extensive body of research conducted in the UK and US that has examined media representations of ethnic minorities and notes that results indicate that xenophobia and institutionalised racism are a regular feature in media representations. Cottle also feels that while sometimes this type of discrimination in the media is visible to the naked eye, on other occasions it takes the form of subtle, built-in biases (p.6), which can be even more dangerous due to the fact that hidden racism in the media is harder to tackle while its effects are equally rippling.

Alia & Bull (2005) argue that when ethnic minorities are not demonised and represented as criminals, they are at best "romanticised and portrayed as quaint" (p.3). The idea of minorities as 'noble savages' originates according to the two authors in the 18th century as it was coined by Jean Jacques Rousseau.

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Nevertheless, this ideology is forged upon the same principles, namely the assumed inferiority of ethnic minority people which tends to serve as the key argument in justifying "policies and practices of assimilation, ethnocide and genocide" (Ross, 1998 cited in Alia & Bull, 2005, p.3). A brief glimpse at the history of the idea of noble savages shows that this label was initially swiftly attached to Native Americans mainly because, according to Wilson II and Gutierrez (1985), they showed "primitive innocence, their willingness to share food and other essentials of life freely in a communal environment, and their dark, handsome physical appearance" (p.68). Following on, recent experience shows us that the same label has been/is assigned to Black minorities (based upon the assumption that they are good musicians and dancers) and also on the Roma/Gypsy and Traveller minorities (mainly due to their nomadic culture and romantic lifestyle as well as their passionate music etc.).

Looking at the American news media, Wilson II and Gutierrez (1985) strive to identify several stages in the history of representations of 'the cultural other' in this particular media genre. In their view, the first stage is the exclusionary phase, which tends to be characterised by a lack of coverage of people of colour in the news media. The message during this period seems to point to the fact that minorities lack status and become therefore completely excluded from American society (p.136). The second stage (the threatening-issue phase) refers to the fact that during this period ethnic minorities are starting to be part of media representations, however they are most likely perceived as a threat to the existing social order. In the third phase (the confrontation phase), the conflict between the two sides (us vs. them) escalates as a consequence of fear and perception of threat. The fourth stage, namely the stereotypical selection phase refers to the fact that while there is growing presence of ethnic minorities in the media, the dominant perspective is still White. The last phase, in the authors' view refers to the integrated coverage stage which, in antithesis to the exclusionary phase, implies that minorities will have an enhanced presence in all types of news as well as in news media professions.

While these stages may follow the typical logic of conflict and its resolution, the so-called phases rarely follow the same sequence in real life. Firstly, representations of migrants as threats to society seem to be omnipresent in the media discourse in many diverse societies and in spite of diversity policies in place. This is perhaps surprising as, despite the dynamic context shaped in the last decades by globalisation and increased movement of people, negative

myths and stereotypes seem to persist in the media discourse about migrants and ethnic minorities. Braham (1982) argues that the explanation might lie in the fact that race and immigration need to be seen as two very controversial issues that arouse strong emotions. Thus, he believes that it is only to be expected that the media coverage of such sensitive matters will be controversial.

Moreover, these above-mentioned stages tend to be less distinct from one another in real life as portrayals of migrants and ethnics as outcasts of the society alternate with positive articles that illustrate the 'benefits' of integration (i.e. conforming to the rules of the majority). Another important aspect which is neglected by Wilson II and Gutierrez's (1985) approach is the fact that media today tend to abandon the old-fashioned racism while embracing a modern, new type of racism, which may be more subtle to detect and counter.

The use of the term 'new' does not signify that this particular type of racism is of recent invention, however when Barker proposed the term in 1981 he named it so as to distinguish between the classic ('old') racism and its more refined version. In short, new racism includes a general emotional hostility towards the 'Others'; resistance to their political demands; and, more interestingly, a belief that racism is dead (Entman, 1990).

Gabriel (1998) argues that some of the media articles pretend to distance themselves from racist motives by invoking apparently neutral, universal terms (e.g. 'taxpayers', 'law abiding citizens' vs. 'fraudsters', 'smugglers', etc.). However the general climate still seems to be one of instigation to fear. Furthermore the author indicates that sometimes fears are extended to more than 'foreigners' (that is to say 'non-nationals') but also to other categories such as naturalised migrants (who are already full citizens) as well as subsequent generations of migrants (people who were born and raised in the country).

One of the pioneers in the study of ethnic minorities in the news is Teun van Dijk. In one of his articles (van Dijk, 2000) he discusses the widespread racism in the news media whereby minorities are often represented in a passive role unless they are agents of negative actions (such as illegal entry, crime, violence or drug abuse) (p.39-40). In an earlier study, Van Dijk (1998 cited in Philo, 2007) notes that this polarisation between 'us' and 'them' is constructed upon the argument that good deeds are almost exclusively attributed to the in-group and the negative ones are assigned to the out-group. Pettigrew (1979 cited in Yinger, 1985) also brings to the discussion the ultimate attribution error which refers to the fact that while negative acts of members of a particular group

are seen to emerge from genetic characteristics, their positive actions are explained solely by temporary forces and events.

Discussing the emergence of the new racism in the media, Van Dijk (2000) also notices that this type of racism "wants to be democratic and respectable, and hence first off denies that it is racism" (p.33). Thus, while 'old racism' simply portrayed the minorities in a negative way, the new racism is worse as 'Their' bad actions (criminality etc.) coalesce with 'Our' good ones' (empathy, generosity etc.) stressing even more their ascribed 'inferiority' (Alia and Bull, 2005).

Myths and stereotypes

Having examined a considerable body of research in the UK and the United States about representations of ethnic minorities, Cottle (2000a) concludes that findings "generally make for depressive reading" (:7), both in the case of entertainment and news media.

In the Irish context there are very few studies investigating the portrayals of ethnic minorities and migrants in mainstream media and most of these tend to focus exclusively on the portrayals of asylum seekers and the refugee population. It is only recently that media studies in Ireland have begun to understand and trace the complexities of the migration process and its relation to media (Titley, 2008, p.4).

NCCRI[9] and the Equality Authority in their 2003 report concludes that in spite of the fact that the Irish media reporting on asylum seekers and refugees 'softened', the same stereotypes still dominate the discourse. These findings are strikingly similar to those emerging from studies of refugees and asylum-seekers in England (Kaye, 2001) and Scotland (Mollard, 2001) that signal the fact that the media environment is generally characterised by negative images and hostility towards asylum seekers as well as manifesting a 'culture of disbelief' towards the genuineness of their claims (Mollard, 2001, p.4).

In 2001, a study produced by the Centre for Migration Studies in University College Cork investigated the coverage of migration issues in the Irish Times in terms of language used, themes covered in headlines and texts, and

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[9] NCCRI (The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism) represented an independent expert body that sought to provide advice and to develop initiatives to combat racism and to work towards a more inclusive, intercultural society in Ireland (source: www.nccri.ie). The organisation has however closed in December 2008 due to cutbacks in government funding.

the quantity of material published (UCC, 2001, p.1). The results indicate that 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' are the most encountered keywords in the articles, with a strong emphasis on the headcount issue. The study also finds this trend to be rather surprising mainly due to the fact that the real number of asylum seekers and refugees was at the time considerably smaller than that of the labour migrants.

More recently, the report entitled Broadcasting in the New Ireland. Mapping and Envisioning Cultural Diversity (2010) authored by Gavan Titley, Aphra Kerr and Rebecca King O'Riain, constitutes probably the most comprehensive study of media diversity in Ireland to date. This research was carried out in the context of the increased flow of migration into Ireland during the late 1990s and 2000s, a phenomenon that has contributed to a change in the composition of media audiences in the Republic. The project adopts a mixed approach by reviewing the programmes, policies and policy documents as well as surveying the opinions of the broadcasting practitioners in order to understand their editorial approaches to cultural diversity, interculturalism and multiculturalism in Irish broadcasting as well as their perspectives on their audiences. At the same time this empirical research also qualitatively explores the migrants' views and practices in relation to their media consumption. The conclusion is fascinating indicating that while multiculturalism, interculturalism and diversity have become key terms in societies receiving migrants, these concepts are in many cases understood and used in inconsistent and contradictory ways. Moreover, the report highlights that in some cases the presence/absence of diversity programming is not the only relevant indicator in analysing media representations of diversity. It thus points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of the issues.

Compiling the results emerging from literature in Ireland and UK (Gabriel 1998; Cottle, 2000a; Mollard, 2001; Kaye, 2001; UCC, 2001; NCCRI, 2003 and many others), several themes seem to crystallise from the portrayals of asylum seekers and refugees. One of the most common tendencies is to play 'the numbers game'. This refers to the manifested concern about a possible 'invasion' (or 'swamping') of the country by migrants who come as a 'tide' or 'wave', as an overwhelming 'flood'. These water-related metaphors are used as powerful visual elements aimed at creating panic against the numerous and seemingly unstoppable force. Besides the uses of such metaphors and hyperbolas, newspapers almost invariably invoke statistics (sometimes 'deformed') in order to support these arguments. In correlation with these

elements, numerous mentions are also made about the uncontrolled aspect of migration implying that the government has lost its grasp over the issue. Mention of threats to national identity and the fear of being out-numbered are also emerging from most media representations.

Another favourite theme adopted by media in relation to the representation of diversity is to resort to what scholars refer to as the demonisation of migrants. Thus, migrants are portrayed quite often as criminals engaged routinely in activities such as begging, petty theft and other more serious criminal activities (such as trafficking, drugs, rape etc.). In relation to the issue of asylum seekers and refugees, many comments are made regarding their 'genuineness' and the so-called ineligibility in claiming political asylum as well as reaping the benefits associated to this status. Hence, most media articles pose questions regarding their honesty, hinting at the fact that they are 'bogus' asylum seekers coming to Ireland in 'designer clothes'. All too often asylum seekers and refugees are described as 'spongers' who only exploit the social welfare system, thus bearing a huge cost for the state and being a burden to the taxpayer.

Migrants (and in particular asylum seekers and refugees) are also accused of crippling the public services. There is already an established tradition of constantly assigning these categories the scapegoat role by persistently blaming them, for example, for overloading the health, housing and educational system. Moreover, these two groups are perceived as 'takers', but no 'givers', in other words as a burden to the state since they allegedly make no contribution monetarily or socially to the economy and society.

Foreigners are also being referred to as violent characters (routinely portrayed as 'beasts', feeding on violence and aggression towards others). References to their unhealthy lives are also frequently emerging in media articles: migrants are considered to represent a risk to health, in particular when their children go to the same school as the natives).

Other themes that emerge from various empirical studies of media representations of migrants also include mention of: legal and rights-related issues; reception/ dispersal of asylum seekers and housing-related difficulties (e.g. the Irish government initiative in 2000 to accommodate the increasing number of asylum seekers in flotels); country of origin information and narratives; political debates; programme refugees etc. There are also some newspaper articles which describe examples of conflicts, verbal or physical attacks experienced by asylum seekers and refugees.

It is interesting to note that while the above-mentioned myths and themes emerge from the media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees, only few of these stereotypes are truly specific to these two categories. Many of the other themes are used by the media to discuss issues related to the general debate over immigration. Concern about the numbers of new migrants as well as their 'share of the blame' for overburdening of the public services have been favourite topics in the Irish media in the last few years. Other immigration-specific issues emerging from the newspapers in Ireland are: issues regarding the exploitation of foreign workers (e.g. the Gama workers[10] and the Irish Ferries[11] work disputes); cultural diversity events and initiatives as well as wider issues pertaining to minorities in Ireland, their identities and integration/exclusion; the activities of NGOs and other support groups as well as anti-immigrant activities and organisations; European and international comparisons in various migration-related issues; Government, Industry and trade union views on need for immigration (UCC, 2001).

In a different context, Campani (2001) reaches the same conclusions in her investigation of the migrants' portrayals in the Italian press. She concludes that almost invariably migrants are shown to occupy a subordinate position and they are always compared to the poorest and most socially marginal Italians (p.47). She also views that the criminalisation of migrants reaches the extent of a 'national obsession'. In addition to this, her study also indicates a tendency towards the 'folklorisation of migrants' by noting that events which are significant for the migrant communities are described in purely folkloristic terms, hardly paying attention to any of their historical, cultural and anthropological dimensions (ibid.).

While attempting to identify literature on the topic of Romanian and Roma representations in the media, very few studies were found in spite of the extensive search. Moreover these few existing studies centre exclusively on the representations of Roma (of all nationalities) in the mainstream media (Kaye, 2001; Wood and King, 2001; Mollard, 2001). The very rare mentions of the word 'Romanian' in studies of media representations are for the purpose of establishing where the Roma/Gypsy came from (e.g. 'Romanian Gypsy') or sometimes simply used interchangeably. What also seems worth noting is the

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[10] This work dispute took place in 2005 when hundreds of Turkish construction workers employed by GAMA have revolted against the very low wages they were receiving.
[11] The company created a huge dispute when, in 2005, they decided to fire more than 600 Irish and British workers in order to contract workers from Eastern Europe which, following the re-flagging of all ships to Cyprus, would be allowed to work below the Irish minimum wage)

fact that these existing studies seem to have emerged around the same period, namely in 2001, probably due to a surge in the number of Gypsy asylum seekers in the UK and Ireland in the late 1990s.

It appears that Roma are one of the most negatively portrayed in the media throughout Europe. Several authors mention that there are only a few categorisations of Roma in the press: as victim, as criminals and menace, and as exotic exhibitionist 'Other' (symbolised as wild and savage due to their perceived nomadic culture) (Sibley, 1999 [1995]; Alia and Bull, 2005). However, as Sibley argues, there is a "definite split between the romanticized 'Gypsy' who (in person or in absentia) performs for tourists, and the 'real' Roma depicted in the news media" (p.24). Sibley sees in such portrayals a great degree of similarities to the representations of the Irish in the British media.

Even as asylum seekers the Roma groups are perceived to be 'less deserving' than other asylum-seeking groups. Most often, Roma are blamed for all the evils and used as an illustration of why asylum seeking is disastrous for a society. An example from a study of the Scottish press notes that

> "many articles explicitly denied the legitimacy of asylum claims from Roma people and focused on the negative actions of a small number of Roma asylum seekers to support the idea that all asylum applications from this community are problematic" (Mollard, 2001, p.15).

Drawing several conclusions from the literature reviewed so far it seems particularly interesting to observe that there is a blending of old and new elements of racism to be noted in the representations of migration-related issues in the Irish and British newspapers. Thus we see newspapers which merely reproduce myths of 'filthy', 'unhealthy' 'beasts', deeply embedded into a world of 'violence and crime'. These representations seem to clearly reflect the link between dirt and danger discussed extensively by Mary Douglas in her book *Purity and Danger* (1966). On the other hand there is also a 'modern' approach that endeavours to justify the racist discourse by resorting to numbers and statistics as well as apparently neutral claims which clearly denotes the language and argumentation of new racism.

In Jackson's view the peril of contemporary racism is that it brings into play a preformed vocabulary, a repertoire of racist images and stereotypes that are drawn on selectively as occasion demands (1989, p.133).

While the above-mentioned myths and favourite themes in the newspapers focus on asylum seekers, refugees and sometimes economic migrants, there are almost no studies in Ireland looking at how different ethnic

minorities are represented in the media. In a similar way there is a dearth of research at the European level on the coverage of ethnic minorities in the press. However following September 11th events we witness an emergence of Islamophobic tendencies in the press worldwide and while the issue of nationality or country of origin tends to be down-played, religion was propelled to the forefront of debates on ethnicity (Alia and Bull, 2005). Thus, the target of negative representations and attribution of 'filth' has shifted slightly. An EUMC (2006b) study highlights the fact that Muslim communities perceive media content to be very biased and distorted from reality. Findings indicate that Muslims feel that media only focus on presenting the extreme, abnormal events that involve Muslims, while leaving aside the regular, uncontroversial everyday events involving Muslim communities. Moreover the study also points out that those members of the Muslim communities which have collaborated with the media often express discontent in relation to their experience and complain about frequently being misquoted and having their words taken out of context.

In conclusion mass media continue to operate a racist discourse even though they often publicly commit the "to the ideals and practices of an inclusive multi-ethnic, multicultural society" (Cottle, 2000a, p.3) and the political climate is "at least superficially intolerant to discrimination" (Alia and Bull, 2005, p.141).

In the general context of studies of media representations of diversity, Elias and Lemish (2008) point out that, in spite of the massive body of international research on the topic, almost the entire scholarship tends to be focused on issues pertaining to racism. While in some cases this omission may be taken to represent an indication of the seriousness and the extent of racism in the media, the lack of a more varied approach to the representations of migrants and ethnic minorities may also represent a limitation of research design: focusing on the most salient facts while ignoring other more diverse representations.

Another significant gap that can be noted within the otherwise considerable body of research on the media representations of migrants refers to the lack of studies on the portrayals of migrants in the mainstream media in their 'home' countries. Discussing the case of Senegalese migrants in Italy, Riccio (2001) mentions that there is a clear line of separation between media from home which represent migrants as 'heroes' and the racist tone of the media in the host country. Representations of migrants in the homeland media become particularly relevant in situations where evidence seems to indicate that the tone

used by homeland media to describe its migrants or diaspora is one of superiority and condescension.

2.2   Audiences and producers: diasporic involvement with media

Spheres and 'sphericules' – understanding ethnic and diasporic audiences and their media

According to Habermas (1974), the public sphere needs to be understood as a realm of our social life, "a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed" (Habermas, 1989, p.xi). For Habermas, the ideal-type (to use a Weberian term) of such a sphere was the "bourgeois public sphere", however he points out to the demise of these arenas of debate (e.g. saloons and coffeehouses) caused by the rise of mass media and consumer culture.

Several defining elements of a public sphere are key for the social studies. On the one hand Habermas sees the public sphere as a space that encourages rational/critical debate. It is a space where people come together freely and, disregarding their status, they discuss matters of general interest which may further be conducive to influences of political action. Furthermore, Cavanagh (2007) notes that in the Habermasian acceptance, public sphere takes shape "where members assemble and debate neither exclusively as representatives of their own interests nor as the 'talking heads' of procedures of established power" (p. 60). Hence, the public sphere is, at least in theory, a symbol of the democratic process.

The concept of the public sphere has been criticised by numerous scholars. For example, Lyotard (1984) and Fraser (1992) (both cited in Papacharissi, 2002) feel that the public sphere is far from being a space that allows for "freedom of assembly and association and freedom to express and publish their opinions" (Habermas, 1974, p. 49), but rather a "realm for the privileged men to practice their skills of governance, for it excluded women and non-propertied classes" (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11).

Furthermore, Foster (1996) comments on the fact that the idea of the public sphere assumes its members to be able to rationally think for themselves and to develop independent critical opinions (p. 28).

There are also authors who criticise the idea that mass media has led to the demise of the public sphere. However, more and more scholars tend to agree that perhaps Habermas's ideal-type (the bourgeois public sphere) is only

one example of such a sphere (Cavanagh, 2007) and that new public spheres are emerging.

Often, studies that focus on the analysis of media messages and their audiences are carried out in the frame set by the national-specific public spheres. However this perspective has recently started to give way to alternative ways of understanding audiences. Elkins (1997) finds that "mass media are slowly being replaced by targeted or 'addressable' media with specialized and more homogenous audiences" (p.139).

Gitlin's work (1998) adds to this direction of study as he proposes a new concept, that of 'public sphericules', to refer to the public spheres belonging to minorities. The author argues that the image of a unitary public sphere tends to be incompatible with the extent of multiculturalism characterising today's society and media. Thus, by targeting subcultures, media tend to capitalise on identity boundaries. Building on Gitlin's work, Cunningham (2001) claims that what characterises these minority public spheres is that they represent social fragments of the public sphere and they share many of its characteristics (Cunningham, 2001). However, he argues that sphericules "are rarely subsets of classic nationally bound public spheres but are none the less vibrant, globalized but very specific spaces of self- and community-making and identity" (Cunningham, 2001: 133).

Cunningham also feels that the sphericules are particularly important as they provide dispersed communities with a central site for communications. Moreover, they contribute to stimulating a debate which will further lead to the articulation of insider ethnospecific identities (: 134). Husband (2005) concurs that these sphericules are extremely important in contributing to a viable and healthy multi-ethnic public sphere (: 476).

The implications of these arguments for understanding diasporas as both audiences and as producers of their own media are tremendous. Diasporic audiences are no longer necessarily understood as fragments of any wider national audience. Due to their transnational involvement and belonging, these audiences are constructed at the confluence of many distinct national public spheres. According to Aksoy & Robins (2003) this aspect tends to raise multiple empirical and interpretational difficulties in contextualising the media use of ethnic minorities mainly because migrants no longer belong to a single interpretative community (: 380).

Moreover, it is important to note that the process of fragmentation of audiences does not only refer to the distinction between majority and minority,

between different countries of origin or ethnicities. The 'ethnic minority' label usually conceals an even more fragmented audience by criteria such as age, gender, class and political affiliation (Husband, 2005). This implies that when analysing the media diets of ethnic minority and diasporic groups, researchers need to pay attention to other key factors that may play an important role in the consumption of media.

Furthermore the idea of the sphericules also needs to be analysed in the context of diasporic media production. Within the field of media studies, a small area of research has begun to develop in the last two decades around the theme of diasporic or ethnic minority media. These two concepts have been used interchangeably, and they refer to "highly diverse array of organisations, practices and settings where […] narratives are constructed" (Tsagarousianou, 2004: 61).

In comparison with the vast body of scholarship on the representations of migrants and ethnic minorities in the mainstream media, studies of ethnic media production have been scarce and this, according to Cottle (2000a), "threatens to underestimate, and under-theorise the important forces that both condition and constrain, as well as facilitate and enable, ethnic minority media involvement in the production of representations" (: 15-16). Most literature on ethnic minority/ diasporic media emanates from a functionalist viewpoint, as authors try to explain their emergence through the functions that this type of media fulfils for ethnic minorities and diasporas respectively.

It is essential to note that while some studies tend to engage with a restrictive definition of ethnic/diasporic media understood as media content that is produced **by** ethnic minorities/diasporas themselves and **for** themselves, there are also studies which include under this label all media produced for ethnic minorities/diasporas, i.e. including those part of the mainstream media in either the 'homeland or the 'host' country which are targeted towards these communities. While this section engages solely with the restrictive meaning of the concept, in the wider context of this research both types of studies have been reviewed in order to understand the role played by media in the lives of ethnic and diasporic communities.

Many scholars seem to argue that the predominantly negative media representations of migrants and ethnic minorities have a strong influence on the minorities' engagement with media. Hence, it is assumed that in order to resist to the abundance of negative stereotypes, migrants are expected to employ various strategies among which: tackling these representations by reacting and

negating these portrayals – legal challenges and formal complaints (Alia and Bull, 2005); choosing to consume more transnational media and, last but not least, engaging in the production of their own media (Riggins, 1992a; Kellner, 1995; Deuze, 2006; Tsagarousianou, 2001; Kerr, 2007; Srinivasan, 2006; Parker and Song, 2006) in an effort to escape the invisibility or the vilification in the majority ethnic media (Husband, 2005). This latter strategy is expected to constitute the key element in the struggle to make their voices heard and get their point of view across.

While it was typically assumed that the expansion of ethnic media was directly and causally related to the expansion in migration, Deuze (2006) argues that while increasing globalisation and migration is nevertheless a key factor, the growth of ethnic media should be seen as interlinked with the rise of community media in general. Thus the author points out that "the success of ethnic media is not so much a function of the 'ethnic', but of 'media'" (: 267), a consequence of the blurring of boundaries between consumption and production of media and by declining and fragmenting audiences of mainstream media (ibid.)

In relation to the types of media produced by ethnic and diasporic communities, Karim (2007) mentions that newspapers tend to be the most common form of media production. An increasing number of studies also point to other types of media production, mainly based on the new media technologies: diasporic websites and blogs, discussion forums etc. (Chan, 2005; Trandafoiu, 2009, Nedelcu, 2000 etc.).

Discussing the types of content which these particularistic media entail, Srinivasan (2006) argues that diasporic and ethnic productions are not to be perceived as simple exhibitions or aggregations of content, as they are built around locally and culturally specific representations and paradigms (: 505). Their content is very specific and, as Cunningham (2001) also mentions, there is almost no cross-over or recognition outside the specific community in most cases of diasporic cultural production (: 137).

There are however other studies that highlight the fact that this is not always the case. Lin and Song (2006) argue that their study of the immigrant communities in Los Angeles reveals that ethnic newspapers include a large amount of news coverage from the home country (approximately about 50%) which is in stark contrast with the small number of geo-ethnic stories which the authors see as essential to community building and identity construction. Cheng (2005) also points to similar findings. The author notes that the West Canadian edition of the Ming Pao newspaper produced by the Hong Kong migrants in

Canada is not a 'parachute' newspaper from HK, but, on the other hand, it is not fully Canadianized either. The study indicates that only half of the news comes from Vancouver and this highlights the fact that in some cases ethnic media content is as hybrid as its audiences.

Besides studies focused on the content and roles of ethnic minority media, there are also several studies which emphasise the difficulties encountered by ethnic minorities and diasporas in producing their own media. Constraints related to the financial resources available (Cottle, 2000b; Husband, 2005) further reflect upon the ability to employ and retain qualified staff, to ensure a proper circulation and distribution of media produced by minorities and, last but not least, will ultimately impact on the quality of the content produced (Husband, 2005).

According to several authors, one strategy to address the many challenges of diasporic media production is to resort to the Internet due to its accessibility, financial affordability and sustainability. Chan (2005) identifies a trend in recent years of switching most of ethnic media production onto the Internet platform. This constitutes a significant change from the previous decades when the internet was perceived as an 'elite' medium that is quite inaccessible to just about everyone due to the fact that in order to use it productively, one needs to possess technical knowledge and abilities (Daley and James, 1992). However, in an era when computers are becoming an integral part of our lives, where blogs are accessible at every step of the way and websites layouts may be simply generated at the touch of a button, it appears that accessibility might no longer constitute a problem or serious limitation.

Creating meanings around media content: ethnic and diasporic communities as audiences

How diasporic audiences create meaning and decode media messages is increasingly gaining recognition in both the field of communication as well as migration studies. Kellner (1995) for example argues that it is important to understand not only what the audience consumes, but also what they make of it (: 237).

Systematic tracking of minority audiences' consumption patterns is still in early stages (Karim, 1999; Kerr, 2007) and this prompts several scholars to argue for further research in relation to the media use by minorities and the

impact of this consumption on their identity construction (Karim, 1999; Kiely et al., 2006).

Tsagarousianou (2001) places the reason for the lack of studies investigating diasporas' consumption patterns on the implicit assumption that diasporic audiences naturally turn to the diasporic media and use them as their only source of information and entertainment and as resources for identity construction (p.159 and also Karim, 1999). In the Irish context, Kerr (2007) echoes a similar trend and argues that only very limited research has been undertaken on the migrant attitudes to- and consumption of various media sources including both Irish and ethnic media as well as media from their homeland (: 174).

Literature seems to indicate that migrants, diasporas and ethnic minorities do not engage solely in the consumption of diasporic or transnational media, but rather that they consume a great variety of media (Kerr, 2007; Georgiou, 2006). Thus, their media diets can be said to reflect their transnational involvement and their hybrid identities.

Moreover diasporic media consumption is not exclusively conditioned by the simple fact of 'being diasporic'. Other factors that have a strong influence on the media choices include, for example, age, gender, educational and occupational background, social class, recency of their arrival, immigrant or refugee status, and language skills (Cunningham, 2001; Georgiou, 2001; Kerr, 2007; Madianou, 2005).

Thus the area of investigation of media diets of ethnic minorities and diasporas could be considerably wide. Hence, for the purpose of the current study, discussion focuses on the meanings that migrants and ethnic minorities attribute to the media representations of cultural diversity.

The demise of the long-standing hegemony of the linear model of communication (sender-message-receiver) highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding the process of diasporic media consumption. Several authors affirm that this deterministic model of the communication process does not allow for a full exploration and understanding of the relation between communication, culture and identity (Morley and Robins, 1995; also Madianou, 2005).

Striving to address the limitations of the traditional model of communication, Stuart Hall (1973) proposes an alternative model, one that recognises the asymmetrical sets of codes used by media producers for encoding a message and by audiences to decode the same message. Thus,

audiences are no longer regarded as passive consumers who decode the message according to the exact intentions of the producers of the message (Haynes, 2007).

From this perspective, it may be inferred that ethnic minorities and diasporas are not necessarily the powerless victims of mainstream media and, furthermore, the effect of media content on them is not as straightforward as the prediction of the 'hypodermic needle model' seems to indicate. Audiences actively construct meanings around media content and it is through these interpretations that they attribute to the content 'consumed' that media may play a part in people's lives.

Besides creating their own meaning from consuming media messages, several studies reveal that often diasporas and ethnic minorities also critically engage in talking about the media that they consume. Tsagarousianou (2001) for example argues that diasporic media are criticised by South Asians and Greek Cypriots in London for their low quality, their over-comercialisation and also for the failure of these media to recognise that the diasporic audience is different than the one in the country of origin. In her study of the Turkish community in Greece, Madianou (2005) also highlights the fact that they often feel excluded from both Greek media as well as television from Turkey. Georgiou (2001) finds that Cypriots in London often adopt contradictory discourses about media from home, sometimes praising it while at times adopting a very critical discourse.

According to Downing & Husband (2005) all these aspects are particularly important in relation to the responses that migrants or ethnic minorities might develop in relation to potentially negative representations. Hargreaves (2001) feels that such negative representations which contribute to shaping negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities may deter the process of integration by either refusal on the minorities side to integrate in a society that is hostile or, on the other hand by the society's refusal to welcome the ethnic or diasporic group as its equal members. Dolan and McDonagh (2000) also seem to support the argument that the way migrants (and in particular refugees) are portrayed in the media leads to an already-defined and prescribed identity.

Riccio (2001) opts for a less 'deterministic' approach and argues that migrants and ethnic minorities respond to the flow of racist imagery and representations either by adjusting their own image and challenging these conceptions or, more often, by sticking with their own self-image and identity

and internalising the negative imagery. In this latter case, racism and racist misrepresentation are often disregarded as stemming from ignorance (: 120).

Kellner (1995) concludes that the connection between media representations and identity is far from being a one-way causal relation. He highlights the fact that while media have the power to provide us with models of identity (gender roles, images of success and power), media also act to provide people with resources to build our own identities. This aspect is particularly important as it helps us to understand media not just as forms of reproduction of power relations within society, but also as empowering resources that allow audiences to resist the dominant ideology and to "invent their own meanings, identities, and forms of life" (: 3).

In conclusion, further studies are needed in order to comprehend the full extent of the diasporic engagement with media, especially in relation to their interpretations of media representations as well as the media's involvement in their daily lives. The relation to identity is particularly important because it is the common vision of the borderlines, the shared meanings of these borders that make up the group identity.

2.3   Role of media in the lives of diasporas and ethnic minorities

This section engages with existing literature pertaining to the roles of media in lives of diasporic and ethnic groups and it aims to provide an account of media's key links to the process of diasporic identity construction and negotiation.

When discussing these roles, it is important to note that while 'media' is sometimes used in order to describe the contents of the messages circulated between the senders and the receivers, at the same time 'media' also refers to technologies, meaning the channels of communication that may enable people to connect to the public sphere, to receive and disseminate information etc. (Cottle, 2000a; Gillespie, 2000; Madianou, 2005). Hence, when analysing the role of media one needs to consider both these aspects.

Moreover, by embarking on the process of mapping out all aspects in which media contribute to the development, maintenance and renegotiation of diasporic and ethnic feelings of belonging, one needs to be attentive to several issues. On the one hand these groups anticipate (and possibly obtain) certain 'gratifications' by actively engaging in the consumption (and/or production) of a particular type of media (mainstream vs. ethnic minority/diasporic media; 'local' vs. 'homeland' media; news vs. entertainment etc.). Such gratifications may for example include: keeping in touch with media at home, learning a language etc. It is equally important to gain an insight into the more spontaneous or 'perverse' effects (to use Raymond Boudon's terminology) that media might have on their viewers.

In contrast with the anticipated and immediate outcomes, the 'spontaneous' effects of media may not be fully apprehended by its audiences. For example, reading news from home may contribute to adjusting their perceptions of the imagined homeland; in a similar line, being exposed to negative representations of one's group may lead to strengthening the group's collective identity.

Therefore, this section also includes in the discussion those outcomes of media which may not necessarily be sought intentionally by its users. The effort to categorise the various roles played by media in relation to ethnic and diasporic audiences has proven to be quite complex, and this is mainly due to the fact that the functions that media perform are very much inter-related. Thus, instead of constructing a typology of roles based on a set of overlapping

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categories, I have chosen to point towards several very broad areas in which media play particularly important roles in the context of a diasporic identity construction process.

Information about 'here' and 'there'

When discussing the importance of media in the lives of minorities and diasporas, one of the most encountered references is to the dissemination of information. As channels of communication, media facilitate the transmission of messages across physical spaces to fragmented and geographically dispersed groups (Tsagarousianou, 2001; Hesterman, 2003; Karim, 2007).

In many cases the emphasis falls on the search for information about the homeland. The general belief was that migrants' ethnic identities are central to their lives and hence their consumption of transnational media would result from a desire to affirm ethnic belonging (Aksoy and Robins, 2003, p.371).

Migrants undeniably use media to keep up-to date with what happens at home (Tsagarousianou, 2001; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Hepp, 2004; Lin and Song, 2006) and to experience a sort of continuity with the past (Elias et al., 2007; Elias and Lemish, 2008). According to Thompson (2002), by consuming media from home migrants tend to experience simultaneity with the homeland. In addition, media help migrants stay involved in 'the matters of home': by facilitating access to information, diaspora can remain/become politically involved with the homeland and sanction homeland politics by writing protest letters, signing petitions etc. (Rostaș and Stoica, 2006)

However diasporas do not use only media 'from home' or 'about home'. in most cases the demand for more and varied information leads migrants to combine different sources of information: mainstream media from host society, ethnic minority media or media produced in the 'home' countries, enabling them to 'build up a more coherent overall picture than any single channel puts on offer' (Aksoy and Robins, 2003, p.379).

In a similar manner, Deuze (2006) argues that migrants may use different media for different information needs. He uses an example of four generations of migrants that use transnational media completely differently arguing that for first and second generation immigrants this particular type of media might be a source of information on homeland events, while for the third generation it may act as a way to enable a dialogue with parents or

grandparents, and the fourth generation might be interested in ethnic media in a search for 'roots' (Deuze, 2006, p.273). This example reflects the diverse and complex roles that media play in the lives of diasporas, going beyond simply keeping diasporas 'in touch' with home.

Media from the host society are used by migrants in order to get familiarised with the new context, learn the language and these aspects will in turn help migrants and diasporas integrate (Lin and Song, 2006; Elias and Lemish, 2008).

The internet has been awarded a special role by several scholars and it is considered migrants' first point of call for help and information about the homeland as well as about the host country (Kerr, 2007, Hiller and Franz, 2004; Trandafoiu, 2006; Nedelcu, 2000; Shi, 2005). Parker and Song's analysis (2006) of the uses of diasporic websites by Chinese in Britain confirm this aspect as they note that the internet is crucial not only for sharing and receiving information, but also for developing intellectual debates and providing emotional support to the diaspora.

Some studies credit media with providing future migrants with information and resources that will potentially influence their decision to migrate (Wood and King, 2001). The two authors refer to a few examples from Britain where allegedly influxes of Roma asylum seekers in Dover within a short period of time took place after the Roma saw film reports on Czech television in which a family of Roma asylum-seekers from Prague spoke enthusiastically about the welcome they received in Dover. Apparently as a consequence, more than 200 people arrived in Dover within only two weeks. A similar situation, according to the authors, was also recorded in Canada.

Mai (2004) points out the impact of Italian media in the Albanian's decisions to migrate to Italy. According to the author, media influence the choice to migrate both directly (through the images that they use to portray the country), and also indirectly (by means of images of lifestyles which appeal to potential migrants). Malgesini (2002) also discusses the indirect effect of media on the desire to migrate to a particular destination, by highlighting the role of media in projecting a symbolic vision of the host country.

Starting with social network theorists, a growing body of research emphasises media's role in the development and maintenance of ties during the migratory process when social relations (and in particular family ties) tend to be affected by geographical relocation (Hiller & Franz, 2004; Lin and Song, 2006; Kerr, 2007). From this perspective media support and enhance social capital.

Several scholars have highlighted the key role played by media (and above all the Internet) in helping migrants keep in touch with family members, and also enabling them to continue to perform their 'household' roles and responsibilities. Miller and Slater (2000) for example discuss the importance of emails in migrants' efforts to accomplish their traditional family roles. Similarly, Alessandrini's (2001) investigation into media use patterns of Chinese circular migrants reveals that media help migrants maintain their previous family duties.

Besides maintaining old ties, several studies point out that media also facilitate the creation of contacts in the new context (Hiller and Franz, 2004; Gillespie, 2000). For example, Hiller and Franz (2004) argue that 'post-migrants' tend to use media in order to seek other migrants with a similar background or to create new useful contacts among the native population.

Going beyond the individual level, media also contribute to the process of community formation by means of facilitating exchange of resources (in particular information) and the creation of common spaces which allow members of the group to interact, socialise and communicate (Wellman and Gulia, 1999 in Srinivasan, 2006, p.499). Thus, media such as the internet, cable transmission and satellite television allow otherwise fragmented audiences to come together, hence connecting dispersed diasporic communities and groups (Cunningham, 2001; Cottle, 2000a; Mitra, 1997; Cheng, 2005).

Media enable members of ethnic and diasporic communities to span physical and time spaces (Srinivasan, 2006; Miller and Slater, 2000; Mandaville, 2001) and create bridges between home-host country (Mandaville, 2001; Georgiou, 2001; Tsagarousianou, 2001). When discussing the particular case of satellite television, Madianou (2005) uses the 'umbilical cord' metaphor to emphasise the link between the homeland and diasporas.

The connectivity that media provide is not only to be understood in terms of reducing physical distance, but also, more symbolically, as reducing emotional distances (Tsagarousianou, 2001). And this aspect is particularly

important for the identity construction process because it allows diasporas to become aware of themselves as a group and to develop a collective identity.

Many studies indicate that media create a spontaneous solidarity between diaspora members (Nedelcu, 2000; Kennedy and Roudomethof, 2001; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Parker and Song, 2006; Karim, 2007; Elias and Lemish, 2008). On the one hand this is the result of media's role in circulating cultural references that have a bonding effect (Georgiou, 2006). On the other hand, as a technology, media facilitate diasporic connections (Gillespie, 2000). This is particularly the case with the internet which, as several studies highlight, has an important effect in empowering diasporas (Elias et al., 2007) and constituting a site of resistance against the host society discourse of exclusion (Trandafoiu, 2009) or against the homeland regimes (Cheng, 2005; Chan, 2005). Diasporic media (understood here in its narrow acceptance as media produced by diaspora) also empower diasporas to act on local collective problems (Lin and Song, 2006; Parker and Song, 2006). By enhancing community members' mobilisation around particular problems, diasporic media lead them to gain a voice and to strengthen their positions in the public space.

Tsagarousianou (2004) argues that media, coupled with other communication technologies (such as mobile phones), play an important role in providing the narratives holding diasporas together. Diasporic media operating at the transnational level can provide a sense of contemporaneity and synchronicity to the dispersed populations that make up a diaspora (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p.62). Sökefeld's research on the Alevi diaspora concludes that the 'explosion' of the Alevi self-affirmation is actually an 'explosion of the media' such as journals, books, radio stations, and more important Alevi websites (Sökefeld, 2002).

Media-watching rituals may also play an important role. Joint viewing of ethnic films and TV (Siew-Peng, 2001) allows families to spend time together; it enforces their unity as a family and also act as a bridge over the cultural gap between generations (Elias and Lemish, 2008). Georgiou (2001) argues that beyond the individual level, communal viewing is also very important for members of the diasporic group as it enhances their solidarity.

Using Appadurai's (1996) line of argumentation, Srinivasan (2006) points out that media's role needs to be discussed in relation to the imagining of a community. He asserts that the process of imagining a diasporic community is mediated through the imageries of the 'mediascape', ideologies of the

'ideoscape', and the ever-shifting demographics of ethnicity ('ethnoscape') and information (p.502).

Thus, by playing an essential role in creating and maintaining connections between very fragmented and dispersed groups, media create the means for enhancing a sense of community belonging and cohesion. Apart from linking geographically dispersed people, media help a diaspora to imagine itself (Georgiou, 2006), to share its values and create common consciousness and awareness, and to mobilise around their self-awareness (Tsagarousianou, 2004).

Morley and Robins (1995) refer to media as the 'memory banks' of our times and they argue that film and television industries supply us with resources for imagining the community. Thus, besides creating a global stage, media "allow ethnic communities to find ways to support their diaspora and retain their culture and language" (Elkins, 1997, p.139; Elias and Lemish, 2008; Cottle, 2000a; Siew-Peng, 2001).

A vast body of scholarship has been devoted to the study of imagined communities and to media's role as facilitator in the imagining process. There have been studies that focused on diasporic newspapers and their role in promoting solidarity between community members and creating awareness around their imagined community (Cheng, 2005). Other studies have paid considerable attention to the internet (Hepp, 2004; Nedelcu, 2000).

When discussing concepts such as 'internet' and 'community' it is impossible to leave out completely the fierce debate about whether Internet actually fosters or discourages the development of 'real' communities (as opposed to 'virtual' ones). The two terms 'virtual' and 'real' are considered by several researchers to be completely opposite concepts hinting at the fact that engagement in virtual communities would signify a retreat from 'real' life. Virtual communities are indeed different from 'physical' ones, as they are more flexible, enabling people to join and leave as they wish and to disregard the parts of the community they dislike (Gauntlett, 2004 [2000]). However, cyberspace is not disconnected from real life (Miller and Slater, 2000), but rather represents an extension of its potentialities (Sökefeld, 2002). In addition, Hiller & Franz (2004) argue that computer mediated communication supports interaction regardless of whether this is rooted in, or sustained by, 'real' community (p.732).

This constant opposition between 'real' and 'virtual' seems to have less salience when researchers have considered the internet's significance in the lives of ethnic minorities and diasporas. This is because most of these groups

are very fragmented and dispersed, and therefore there rarely exists a strong 'physical' dimension of such communities.

An increasing number of scholars call for a more flexible understanding of community. Hence while the concept has been habitually conceived around the bounds of geographical neighbourhood and cultural background (Srinivasan, 2006, p.502), increasing geographical mobility and globalization have shifted the traditional ethnic and local notions of community, thus becoming deterritorialised (Srinivasan, 2006, p.502; Hepp, 2004). Thus, Wilbur (1996) notes that:

> We should be prepared to find community under a wide variety of circumstances, in a broad range of environments, and intermingled with any number of elements that seem to work against the development of "sufficient human feeling" (p.20).

In his study on the uses of the internet by the Indian diaspora, Mitra (1997) concludes that Usenet[12] brings its participants together and it creates awareness of a sense of community rooted in the home country and transferred to the new context. Mitra also finds that the Internet acts as a bipolar force in relation to the way a nation is imagined. On the one hand there are centripetal tendencies which draw migrants together and, on the other, there are centrifugal forces produced by the multiple and varied discourses on the image of the nation, which reflect inner differences and contradictions within the virtual community (in Chan, 2005, p.339).

Not all scholars place the internet as the centrepiece of diasporic community life. While recognising its extraordinary role in connecting communities and contributing to the diaspora's imagining process, Thompson (2002) feels that the main problem lies in the fact that the internet does not allow for any grand diaspora narratives to emerge. The author notes that due to the lack of restrictions and the fluid nature of the internet, the image of the nation tends to be rather transient and ephemeral (p.411). It remains however to be seen whether this is confirmed or, on the other hand, invalidated in the context of the Romanian community in Ireland. Moreover, I argue that it is precisely the fluid nature of the internet that allows for the hybridity which characterises ethnic and diasporic communities to be reflected and imagined.

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[12] USENET is an internet service consisting of thousands of newsgroups. Established in 1980, it is one of the oldest forms of computer network communications still actively used today. (Source: www.usenet.net). USENET is thus the precursor of the online discussion forums today.

Cohesive or corrosive? Media's links to nation-building and to diasporic integration

Due to its complex role in building and keeping communities together, a significant number of studies endeavoured to understand the role of media in the process of integration in (or exclusion from) the host communities.

On the one hand, studies have been fraught with concerns over whether media influence opinions about racial or ethnic differences and conflicts, or whether they simply reflect the pre-existing social attitudes in a society.

Literature pertaining to the study of national identities and nationalism argues that this early 19th century invention promotes an "ideology of the commonness of origins, purposes, and goals" (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p.15). Consequently, many authors point out that cultural complexity is often seen in the national mentality as a threat (Robins, 2008; Dolan and McDonagh, 2000) and immigrants are viewed as antinomies to an orderly working of state and society (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002, p.309).

From this perspective, media appear to play an important role in the nationalistic discourse, that of constructing and enforcing the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. According to many scholars the marking of the boundaries is never unproblematic (Woodward, 1997; Husband, 2005; Downing and Husband, 2005). This is mainly because, by assigning positive and negative characteristics to people and groups, we tend to reify social categories and this may lead further to stigmatization, especially when we consider the case of racial and ethnic identities (Rutter and Tienda, 2005, p.56). It is along these lines of argumentation that media representations seem to operate. The imagery presented in these media portrayals clearly focuses on targeting 'the others' (as opposed to 'us'), thus establishing who is the in- and who is the out-group.

As previously discussed, there may be instances when differences between groups are not so visible. Thus the markers of identity and borders between groups need to be re-invented artificially in an attempt to re-establish order in our environment. This line of argument originating in Mary Douglas's anthropology of dirt becomes particularly important as it signifies that the markers of identity need to be understood as strategic claims in the (media) discourse rather than as cultural features which are unique to one group or another and also easily visible to the 'naked eye'.

Moreover, according to Ansart (1977, cited in Denis-Constant, 1995), by de-valorising the 'Other' and imagining them as a threat (which may or may not be real), identity becomes more than an exercise of imagining a community, but rather a struggle to enforce and legitimise power relations (Denis-Constant, 1995, p.7). Stuart Hall (1996a) argues that racism operates precisely on a principle of constructing borders between 'us' and 'them' and these boundaries need to be constructed as 'impassable symbolic boundaries' between these racial categories (p.445). From this perspective, racism aims to naturalise these differences between 'belonging' and being 'the other' (ibid.).

Along the same lines, Husband (2005) echoes the fact that in any society mass media reflect the dominant discourse and thus they accentuate issues such as discrimination and racism. In his words, "the ubiquity and power of the majoritarian perspective are revealed in the continuing capacity of media professionals to generate xenophobic, ethnocentric and racist media content" (Husband, 2005, p.466). Discussing the power of mainstream press several authors claim that this needs to be sought in the fact that media tend to be the main source of people's knowledge, attitudes and ideologies and, in the absence of people's direct contact with the ethnic minorities, media provide the first news, and also the first definitions of the situations (VanDijk, 2000).

Thus it appears that many scholars see media as powerful tools in the efforts to convey a coherent homogenous nationalistic discourse, by means of excluding minority group voices and undermining the image of (culturally) diverse others and shaping social perceptions and attitudes of the wider society.

Furthermore, Braham feels that media representations can rarely be reversed as once media ignore contrary evidence, they becomes rather uneasy to reveal their mistake (Braham, 1982). This implies that once a group is targeted by negative imagery in media portrayals the chances of getting a share of positive representations is significantly diminished.

In relation to the effects of these portrayals on the opinions and social attitudes of the majority society, there are studies that seem to indicate an almost perfect overlap between these media representations of asylum seekers and migrants and the perceptions held by society of these culturally diverse 'others'. The Millward Brown survey[13] (2004) indicates that, among other aspects, the majority of Irish people tend to believe that asylum seekers are abusing the system and that they are in all fairness disguised economic

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[13] Similar trends have been recorded in the replication of the survey two years later (2006).

migrants (54% of respondents), that Ireland has had its fair share of asylum seekers and that it should not take any more applicants (71% of respondents). Even more respondents (80%) feel that asylum seekers put pressure on essential services such as housing and health.

There are also authors who argue for a more nuanced approach in relation to the potential impact that media have in generating certain perceptions and attitudes towards different races, ethnicities, nationalities etc. Potter (1986) for example believes that while these attitudes may be at least partially mediated through television, there are several other aspects of equal importance such as: exposure to different types of programs; the frequency and duration or amount of exposure; the extent to which media content is believed to be an accurate, real-life representation; and the degree of similarity perceived by the viewer between representations and their real life counterparts (cited in Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p.692).

Referring to news media in particular, Braham (1982) holds that events which fit existing frameworks and sets of assumptions have a better chance of being reported in the news, therefore "an event may be reported not as it happened, but as it is expected to happen" (p.276). When bringing into discussion the way ethnic minorities are portrayed in the media this fact has particular importance as, according to Braham (1982) people tend to react to the media according to their initial attitudes (p.282).

Hargreaves (2001) argues that when looking at the potential impact of media representations on social attitudes towards migrants, one needs to clearly differentiate between immediate behavioural effects and long term attitude formation. It is thus implied that only when these representations are constantly repeated they might gain the power to produce a shift in people's long-term attitudes and beliefs.

Thus, taking all these aspects into consideration, it emerges that the relation between media and public opinion is not a one-way street where one is entirely determined by the other. Mass media may inform public opinion, but on the other hand they also need to resonate with what people believe to be true. Therefore whether media representations have the power to change opinions or not is of less importance. Some scholars feel that we should seek the role of media in their power to create awareness around particular issues rather than to ascribe them a deterministic role in generating or influencing social opinions (Braham, 1982; Downing et al., 1990; Kaye, 2001; Alia and Bull, 2005). In Cohen's words (1963): [The press] may not be successful much of the time in

telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling people what to think about" (p.13 cited in Ettema, 1990, p.325).

While media representations have often been suspected of producing racism due the classifying effects of stereotypes involved in these portrayals, other issues, such as social class, seem to be almost absent from the discussion about migrants, diasporas and the media. According to Jackson (1989), ideologies of racism tend to intersect in complex ways with other ideologies, including class and gender (p.133). Several studies tend to indicate that attitudes towards immigrants and ethnics are strongly influenced by factors such as status, level of education, income level and occupation (Hernes and Knudsen, 1992; Millward Brown IMS, 2004).

There are also scholars who tend to highlight the more positive roles which media may play in the society. Wood and King (2001) argue that, through the nature of the images that are produced and re-produced, media representations may also be particularly important in the process of social inclusion. While these aspects are nevertheless important, besides very few brief mentions in the existing scholarship, they have so far been insufficiently explored.

Particular attention has also been given to the use of media in the ethnic/diasporic language and while some authors see the consumption of this type of media as equivalent to resistance to integration, others argue that this was hardly the case.

Jeffres's research on the topic of ethnicity and media use illustrates that transnational media consumption tends to be strongly correlated with ethnic identification and ethnic behaviours (such as language use, participation in ethnic organisations and celebrating ethnic festivals) (Jeffres, 2000). However it is arguable whether this aspect will necessarily impact negatively on the desire to integrate into the host country.

Adopting a rather cautious approach, other authors suggest that transnational media or ethnic media consumption (and production) cannot be routinely assigned a negative role in the process of integration. On the contrary, this type of media tends to play a double role for diasporic/ethnic communities. Riggins (1992a) for example refers to the role of ethnic media as a paradox. He argues that on one hand it contributes to ethnic cohesion and cultural maintenance, but on the other hand encourages a certain degree of assimilation to mainstream values (p.4). This view is reinforced by other scholars who see transnational media as both cohesive and corrosive (Deuze, 2006), preserving

cultural identity or facilitating adaptation (Lin & Song, 2006), enabling both inward and outward integration (Elias & Lemish, 2008).

Deuze (2006) indicates that minority media allow for communication in their own language and provide "a platform for discussion and exchange within the minority communities as well as between the minority and the majority communities" (p.265-266). It has been argued however that too much coverage of news from home may damage integration and that a balanced choice of content would be more beneficial for the integration process (Lin and Song, 2006). However this argument tends to ignore the possibility that migrants consume a variety of media and that their information sources are not necessarily based entirely upon ethnic minority media.

Discussing the process of ethnic media production, some writers assume that this clearly represents the desire of these communities to connect to their 'homeland' and its culture, thus remaining loyal to another state, and they do so by taking advantage of the new communications technologies that shrink the spatial distance. In addition to this, some policymakers also perceive that the growing popularity of ethnic minority media will eventually disrupt the fabric of society (Deuze, 2006, p.266). Criticising these views, Moorti (2003) points out that by having the power to construct their own media, diasporas are not necessarily 'loyal' to their homeland but, on the contrary, they are able to "reveal this desire for multiple homes through specific representational strategies" (p.359). The decision to engage in ethnic media production thus simply refers to a desire to maintain or restore particular languages and cultures, while at the same time working across cultural and linguistic boundaries (Alia and Bull, 2005, p.106).

According to Cunningham (2001), the assumptions that ethnic media symbolise adherence to a mono-culture of the 'home' country need to give way to an approach that allows us to perceive ethnic minority media not as the cement that forms and gives identity to the community, but as a stage where difference and dissension can be managed by the community itself (p.138).

From this perspective, several authors view the emergence of ethnic minority media as a consequence of misrepresentation or a diminished attention paid to the specific issues of ethnic minorities in the mainstream media and hence these groups adopt a strategy to challenge the dominant discourse and make their voices heard (Cottle, 2000a; van Dijk, 2000; Alia and Bull, 2005; Karim, 1999; Chan 2005). The central idea of this particular approach is that, by the production of their own media, ethnic minorities are able to bypass the

gatekeepers in the production of information and make their views heard (Wilson II and Gutierrez, 1985). Ethnic minority media enable the amplification of their voices and an expansion of their collective power (Alia and Bull, 2005). In addition, according to Thompson (2002), the images and the representations of their cultures that the migrants, ethnic minorities or diasporas produce themselves are less monolithic than the images produced by the organised sources of mainstream media.

In conclusion, while it is likely that transnational or ethnic media involve a desire to preserve cultural heritage, they also constitute sites for adopting new traditions, retaining or breaking original cultural links (Elias and Lemish, 2008). The real question lies in understanding the mix of media consumption of ethnic and diasporic communities as well as the active meanings that these audiences associate with what they consume.

From collective imagination to the shaping of identity

Previously discussed literature highlights the fact that media help ethnic minorities and members of diasporas connect and collectively imagine their community. In close correlation to this aspect, numerous studies have also attributed media an essential role in the process of construction and reconstruction of ethnic, diasporic and even national identities.

While it was typically inferred that consumption of media content produced in the country of origin (transnational media) would signify allegiance to the homeland and implicitly a lack of integration in the host country, this assumption has not been confirmed by research.

It is nevertheless important to recognise the fact that the consumption of diasporic media help migrants access images from home (Georgiou, 2001) and connect back to the homeland in order to overcome nostalgia and homesickness (Hiller and Franz, 2004; Alessandrini, 2001; Elias and Lemish, 2008), maintain their cultural traditions and language (Shi, 2005; Siew-Peng, 2001) and rediscover their affiliations and old allegiances (Thompson, 2002). Thus, several authors argue that the role of diasporic media is to support the continuation of national identities (Hylland Eriksen, 2006). Hiller and Franz (2004) also point out that diasporic websites tend to be remakes of the communities of origin based on location.

Georgiou (2001; 2006) however argues that by consuming media about 'home', migrants do not simply extend national identities to the new context. This type of media allows migrants to operate with images from homeland that are not 'frozen' in their memory, therefore contributing to an updating of the images of homeland and re-negotiating their belonging and identities.

In a similar line, a study by Aksoy & Robins (2003) of the consumption of transnational television from Turkey notes that, for Turkish migrants, watching television channels from the 'homeland' in not generated by a desire to reinforce their Turkish identities. On the contrary, the authors conclude that consumption of transnational media merely help them keep in touch with what happens 'over there', and avoid feeling completely disconnected from Turkish realities and affairs. Once they access such information, migrants simply get on with their lives (p.377).

Riggins also mentions ethnic minority media's role in defining, preserving but also weakening ethnic and national identity. Several other authors also seem to argue that while diasporic media do indeed provide migrants with points of cultural identification by facilitating the circulation of cultural symbols and images, values and norms specific to a particular culture (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p.52), these identities can be created, resisted, and more importantly challenged and transformed (Cottle, 2000a; Tsagarousianou, 2004)

In conclusion, by enabling migrants, ethnic minorities and diasporas to access information and cultural products from a variety of contexts (homeland, host country, local or regional and international), media reflect the hybrid nature of minorities themselves (Jeffres, 2000). Moreover, media help these communities create their own social and cultural space, their symbolic communicative spaces (Madianou, 2005) which are distinct from both the 'home' and the 'host society. Moorti (2003) supports the argument that the diasporic optic is rather "a sideways glance that looks constantly at two or more worlds and moves in different directions at once" (p.355) and construct hybrid identities (Kolar-Panov, 1996; Srinivansan, 2006).

Last but not least, it is crucial to note that while media play a key role in shaping identities, the impact is not the outcome of a direct causal relation (Riggins, 1992a, Georgiou, 2006). The role of media needs to be sought in the enabling ethnic and diasporic communities to imagine and to negotiate boundaries between us and 'the others'.

Old wine, in new bottles? Or what makes the internet so great?

Quite a few studies in the field of media and (diasporic) identities have given prominence to the internet as the favourite medium mobilised by the diasporic communities in order to construct and articulate their identity discourses.

The main reason appears to be the ease with which new media technologies enable almost instantaneous sharing, identity formation, communication and publicisation (Srinivasan, 2006, p.504). Thus, the internet undeniably enables its users to become active cultural producers and explore significant questions about their identities, often in ways which may not otherwise be possible in 'real' or, better said, 'offline' life (Cheung, 2004, p.55).

The internet seems to have taken the place of video technologies previously praised by several authors for being popular, cheap and flexible (Kolar-Panov, 1996; Skrbiš, 1998) and for allowing those lacking in writing proficiency to express their thoughts and feelings (Skrbiš, 1998). While these video-letters that migrants and their families were sending back-and-forth may have been replaced to a certain extent by the fast spread of emails and mobile-phone technology, their importance cannot be entirely disregarded. Taking into account the YouTube phenomenon and its increasing use by people (and migrants in particular) due to the ease of putting together video material while taking advantage of the speed and reach of the internet, it emerges that technology does not always produce different types of communication, but it may however re-configure the old ways.

Thus, while several scholars insist that a change of medium does not necessarily need to be equated with a change in what is actually transmitted or in the types of communities that it produces (Mandaville, 2001), there are also scholars who argue that the internet has contributed greatly to the re-invention of diasporic connections and therefore leads to new forms of identification (Turkle, 1995; Nedelcu, 2000; Parker and Song, 2006).

There are nevertheless many advantages which the internet offers in comparison with other types of media. The web is an interactive and decentralised medium which allows people to disseminate their own content, thus shifting the model of communication from the traditional 'few producers, many receivers' type to one that involves many producers and many receivers (Chan, 2005).

Gauntlett (2004 [2000]) sees the internet as key for the study of identity and argues that this is mainly because the web enhances the public sphere, it gives anonymity and also allows room for identity play in cyberspace. Foster (1996) supports this view and argues that the Internet "allows each individual user an equal voice, or at the least and equal opportunity to speak" (p. 23).

There are also scholars who are critical about internet's capacity to act as a public sphere. Sparks (1998 cited in Cavanagh, 2007) for example mentions that we should ask ourselves the question of whether the Internet guarantees access to all and whether the citizens have the right to exchange opinions in an unrestricted manner as Habermas asserted. Di Maggio et al. (2001) also question the power of the internet (and in particular the discussion boards) to allow for a rational consensus to occur over a particular matter of interest. However, they feel that the internet definitely constitutes a step in the direction of becoming a renewed public sphere.

In a similar vein, Papacharissi (2002) argues that the internet, as a public space, has indeed the power to facilitate, but not necessarily ensure, "the rejuvenation of a culturally drained public sphere" (p. 22) and he goes on to further argue that the internet facilitates very diverse people to come together and to expand on each other's horizons with culturally diverse viewpoints (p.23). In his view, this aspect captures the essence of the internet as he feels that "the value of the virtual sphere lies in the fact that it encompasses the hope, speculation, and dreams of what could be" (p. 23). Similarly, Cavanagh (2007) argues that the internet is important because it constitutes a space of cohesion and sociality (p. 97).

Discussing the other advantages that the internet brings for communication, Gurak (2004 [2000]) feels there are four key aspects that give it a privileged place among other media: its speed, its reach, its sense of anonymity and interactivity. The author further argues that the internet is characterised by oralness (people write on the internet the same way they speak) and also by casualness in addressing people. This implies that by studying identity on the internet, researchers would be able to access discourses that would be constructed in a 'natural' way, just like in everyday life.

Mandaville (2001) also highlights the importance of the speed of production and communication specific to the internet. Furthermore, another major advantage of this medium is its relatively low cost which enables ethnic and diasporic groups to make use of the web as a space of communication. Karim (1999) also recognises the financial accessibility of the internet and

credits this medium for its easy access, non-linear and non-hierarchical structure.

Several questions emerge in relation to the power relations within each of these groups: for example, are power relations online important?; is the internet truly a non-hierarchical structure? Knapp (1996) believes that online forums tend to be quite different from the other public forums which are "dominated by the conventional formal rhetoric of political debate" (p.183). In the online space configured by the discussion forums, the author argues that the views presented in each message tend to gain their authority from personal experience. From this point of view the analysis of online interactions becomes of key importance.

In relation to the particular case of diasporas, Georgiou (2006) argues that electronic media are more compatible with the nature of a diaspora. These media "saturate the diasporic space" (p.12) therefore playing an increasing role in the construction of meanings and negotiating identities. Triandafyllidou and Wodak (2003) insist on the fact that new media technologies tend to create "a sense of immediacy and closeness among people who are physically very far and who may even not know each other" (p.207). Its volatility and degree of deterritorialisation, in Hepp's view, favour the articulation of hybrid and transnational cultures and identities (Hepp, 2004). Thus, the internet is seen as a de-centralised medium, used by ethnic minorities in order to generate and disseminate their own identity narratives.

Several authors have opined that internet-based technologies hold a huge empowering potential for otherwise marginalised communities (Srinivasan, 2006; Foster, 1996). Furthermore, Thompson (2002) argues that new media allow for 'new and fresh voices to appear more easily than in any other form of mediated communication' (Thompson, 2002, p.411). There are also views which seem to point to the fact that the internet does not necessarily make ethnic minorities more visible. On the contrary, as Lockard (1996) points out, by constructing their discourses online minorities tend to disappear from the public view and their content becomes accessed only by those interested. While the internet may not necessarily make minorities more visible to the public eye, this does not destroy the rationale for acknowledging the other key roles which the internet plays for these communities.

The internet has been criticised due to the fact that the word 'virtual' (assigned to any form of online interaction) was constantly opposed to 'real communities'. However cyberspace is not disconnected from real life (Sökefeld,

2002) and, as Nedelcu (2000) points out, the frontier between these two is rather fluid and permeable involving different degrees of overlap between virtual and physical communities (Sökefeld, 2002). In a similar vein, Miller and Slater (2000) argue that we need to treat this particular form of media as deeply embedded (rather than isolated) from our daily lives.

As Turkle (1995) indicates, we should place the role of the internet in the larger cultural context of eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual. The internet thus signals the move from place-bounded communities to neighbourhoods in cyberspace.

There are also authors who have dismissed the internet for being nothing but a plain interface between the user and the computer. However, if we consider the fact that it facilitates contact and collective interactions sustained over a period of time, one cannot deny that the web seems to be the key element for particular online communities. And these communities may be shaped entirely on the internet (involving no significant 'offline' links) or they may constitute extensions (or precursors) of offline communities.

Concerns have also been expressed about aspects such as anonymity and the relevance of identities and presentations of the self (or groups) online. Thus, as several authors argue that while internet may play an essential role in the lives of migrants and diasporas, for long term effects to develop, the ties and connections have to aggregate in durable networks (Parker and Song, 2006; Nedelcu, 2000). The implications for the present research are that interactions between forum users need to constitute more than occasional, short-lived connections in order for the identity narratives to coagulate into a collective discourse of identity.

In conclusion, while trying to comprehend the value of these new media technologies for ethnic minorities and also to understand whether the Internet really is so much different from other types of media, it is important to note several aspects. On one hand the internet has up to a point incorporated all the other existing forms of media and communication (Gauntlett, 2004 [2000]; Srinivasan, 2006): today we can watch TV online, listen to the radio, keep in touch with our family and friends in writing, but also by using voice (VOIP calls, such as Skype). Therefore the internet from this point of view represents a 'bricolage' of other forms of communication and cannot be assumed routinely to play a different role from other types of media. However, on the other hand, the internet facilitates for new ways of interaction between people: forum discussions, chat groups etc. These 'segments' of the public sphere may allow

for unique forms of identification that other media may not be able to support. These aspects however need to benefit from extensive further research that would clarify whether the internet does indeed enable new types of interaction and expressions of identity.

Summary and conclusions

This chapter provided an overview of the topics emerging from the vast body of scholarship pertaining to media and migration. The first section of the chapter consisted of a critical examination of literature on the representation of migrants, ethnic minorities and diasporas in the media. From this perspective, it emerged that most studies tended to focus on the analysis of text, rather than visual images; on news rather than entertainment media; on asylum seekers and refugees rather than economic migrants and ethnic minorities. Moreover, it was noted that negative representations are central to most of the research initiatives in this field.

The second section of the chapter focused on the ethnic and diasporic involvement with media, by looking at the same time at ethnic minorities and diasporas as audiences as well as producers of their own media. Minorities' decisions to engage in media production have been considered by some scholars as mere reactions to their invisibility or misrepresentation in the mainstream media or as nostalgic desires to (re-)connect to the homeland culture. The role of ethnic minority media is not confined however to these aspects: it enables members of these groups to access information that is specific for the new context of the host society and it also helps create a climate of general public discussion. In addition to this, ethnic minority media represent a form of participation that enhances collaboration and social capital and that places diasporas and ethnic minorities at the confluence between organisations from both the host and home country, thus enabling them to reflect upon their transnational belonging and hybrid identities.

Important aspects in relation to ethnic and diasporic communities understood as audiences have also been highlighted. These groups can no longer be conceived as the powerless victims of mainstream media. In exchange, ethnic minorities and diasporas actively engage with the media that they consume by critically evaluating their quality and by constructing their own meanings of the messages received.

The last section of the chapter emphasised the roles of media in the lives of diasporas and ethnic minorities. Besides their traditional role in disseminating information, media act to support diasporas by maintaining the links between its members; they bridge time and spatial distances, enabling dispersed and fragmented diasporic communities to connect and also providing the narratives to hold these diasporas together.

This section also focused on investigating the role that media representations have on both minority and majority groups. While such representations have sometimes been attributed to an all-powerful role in the shaping of opinions and conditioning integration, the relation between these two variable is never a direct, causal relation.

Media also play an essential role in allowing a diaspora to imagine itself, through sharing of values and cultural products and enabling members of diasporas to mobilise around these markers. From this point of view there is a strong link between media and the process of ethnic and diasporic identity construction. Media thus represent a symbolic space of communication that allows for the identity narratives to be publicly discussed and negotiated.

Of particular importance is the Internet, also sometimes defined as "new media". This chapter also engaged with existing literature on this topic and pointed out the key advantages that the internet presents for ethnic and diasporic groups. Several studies argue that the Internet is quite different from traditional mass media as it constitutes an interactive and decentralized medium which allows people to produce and disseminate their own content. Also the web is praised for enabling its users to create a bricolage of various media contents (video, audio, text). Whether this type of media has indeed the merit of crafting new forms of identification which other media may not be able to support is yet to be established by future research in this respect.

Chapter 3 - Sources of diasporic identity: symbolic markers and manifestations of belonging

Overview of the chapter

While the first two chapters of the thesis focused on the theoretical approaches to the concepts of identity, migration and media, the present chapter draws on the rich empirical literature constructed at the intertwining of the three topics: migration, identity, and media. It aims to map out the sources of diasporic identity and the markers of the boundaries between 'us' and 'them.

The main contribution of the boundary-focused approach to the study of identities is linked to an increasing recognition given to the fact that any form of collective identity involves a certain degree of 'sameness', but difference as well. Many authors thus conclude that identities are not only about inclusion, but also about exclusion (Schlessinger, 1987 in Morley and Robins, 1995; Gilroy, 1994; Woodward, 1997; Georgiou, 2006).

Building on Bauman's argument about the inseparability of the ingroup/outgroup, Georgiou (2006) argues that "the images of Otherness and [the] symbolic boundaries between Us and the Others [are] central in the process of self-identification" (p.132). Hence, when approaching identity from a relational perspective, the markers (or identifiers) in relation to which identity is constructed become of key importance and the choices that people make from a wide range of possible identifiers become particularly relevant.

Thus, this chapter explores the key dimensions which emerge from existing studies of diasporic narratives in relation to 'what it means to be us' vs. 'being them'. These dichotomies are the centrepieces of the identity construction process.

The chapter starts off by examining the crucial role of the 'home' and the 'host' in the diasporic identity construction. The analysis of existing literature reveals several manifestations of attachment experienced by diasporas in relation to the homeland and the host society all which deeply reflect the process of their identity construction.

Besides the 'home'/'host' dichotomy, other markers of identity also emerge from the review of theoretical as well as empirical scholarship. The

negotiation of boundaries between a diaspora and the 'other' ethnic or diasporic groups in the host society becomes crucial for the analysis. Also the role of other significant geographical, political and symbolic markers of identity is highlighted. The chapter concludes with a review of the main dimensions of distinction within diaspora itself in order to highlight the fact that diasporas are far from homogenous groups, but rather fragmented entities with multi-faceted identities.

3.1 Homeland in the diasporic imagination

Culture was traditionally seen as bounded to a certain geographical space which, in most cases, referred to the national territory. National culture, according to many authors, has been deeply inscribed in our identities becoming thus a primary source of cultural identity. Consequently, while there are many identifiers which individuals can choose from in the construction of their identity narratives, scholars have pointed to 'the nation' as one of the most powerful markers of identity, particularly in the case of ethnic, migrant or diasporic groups.

Smith (1991) argues that the nation is important because it permeates most spheres of activity in the life of individuals and communities (p.143). Moreover, the author asserts that the nation provides the most inclusive community (p.144).

Parekh dedicates an entire chapter in his book *A New Politics of Identity* (2008) to the topic of national identities. The author points out that members of a political community (such as the nation state) grow up in a particular national culture and will eventually be shaped by its values and ethos (p.56). Thus, belonging to the national community is a valued part of each individual's identity and cannot therefore be entirely abandoned in exchange for other forms of belonging. This is particularly relevant for diasporic and ethnic minorities as it points to the fact that national culture always plays an important role in their identity discourses and that perfect assimilation (understood as complete detachment from the previous cultural identifications in order to entirely embrace the culture of the host society) is never possible.

Consequently the nation represents a common point of identification (as the country of origin) and it constitutes a common pool of cultural values, memories, myths and symbols that has a crucial input into shaping diasporic feelings of belonging.

As national identities are mainly linked to space and territory, the borders and boundaries that mark the space become extremely important in making one feel at home (Wise, 2000). However, while a nation always keeps a strong reference in relation to territory, the borders do not need to be solely understood as geographical borders (Hepp, 2004). Hence while nations use territorial designations, they need to be rather conceived as mental constructs (Triandafyllidou and Wodak, 2003). And this is, in Bauman's view (1990) what makes the difference between 'the nation' and 'the state': while the latter is a

real, geographical territory and a political and administrative entity, the nation needs to be understood as an imagined community.

The 'home' becomes then a symbolic space that is imagined and re-imagined by diasporas. Therefore national identity and feelings of belonging to the homeland are constructed at the confluence of the nation-state's discourse (sustaining its power and legitimacy based on ideologies of singularity) and the individuals' reproductions, reinterpretations and identifications of the "pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations" (Smith, 2001, p.18).

Several scholars point out that national belongings and attachments tend to amplify when its citizens are separated from it. Halualani (2008) argues that by being away from home, diasporic people tend to attach greater significance to what seems to be naturalised and taken for granted at home. However, while diaspora's physical separation from the country of origin may give rise to an increased awareness and search for the home, the homeland is always 're-created', leading to different forms of attachment and belonging from those experienced within the borders of the state.

An émigré herself, Isabel Allende in her fascinating book *My Invented Country. A Nostalgic Journey Through Chile* (2007 [2003]) argues that homeland in the eyes of a migrant is always constructed around memory, a memory which sometimes 'betrays us' and it is not to be trusted, while at times it becomes deliberately selective. Speaking of her homeland, Allende argues that her imagined Chile was constructed like a puzzle, by picking only some pieces that fit her goal and at the same time ignoring others (p.190).

Thus, the re-construction of home is always a dynamic process, a complex array and re-array of memories, feelings and interpretations of the past. While we have established that the homeland reference is crucial for the diasporic imagination, it is also important to understand in depth the various shapes of the relation that diasporas develop and maintain with their homelands. Therefore our attention needs to be pointed now towards the variety of forms of manifestation of attachment and belonging to the national/ homeland.

Nostalgia is a common reference in many empirical studies (Moorti, 2003; Elias et al., 2007). The concept has often been employed to denote the longing for homeland and all it represents for the migrants (family, rituals, music, traditional food etc.). Nostalgia has thus represented the symptom of being displaced from a symbolic place. From this point of view, nostalgia could be 'cured' by getting involved with the ethnic/diasporic institutions in the host

country such as ethnic stores, community centres, neighbourhoods, churches and other enclave cultural institutions (Greve and Salaff, 2005, p.10, but also Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; Georgiou, 2006), consuming ethnic products (Dolan and McDonagh, 2000, p.10) that anchor identity back in the homeland.

For other authors, nostalgia usually refers to a yearning for the sense of familiarity and the security which 'the home' has provided (Georgiou, 2006). In a similar vein, Allende 2007 [2003] argues that nostalgia for her refers to the desire to regain the lost confidence with which she moved around in her home Chile:

> I know the idiosyncrasy of my people just like the back of my hand. Nothing surprises me anymore there, I can anticipate the reactions of the others, I can understand their gestures, their silences, their cutesy words, their ambiguous reactions. Only there I feel comfortable at the social level […]' (p.144).

It was also assumed that, by feeling nostalgic about their 'lost' homeland, migrants would manifest a longing to return. However the link between nostalgia and the desire to return is not necessarily a straightforward connection. Several studies (Bleahu, 2003; Shi, 2005; Mihai, 2006; Ștefănescu, 2006; Devlin Trew, 2010; Sandu, 2010) note that the constant renegotiation of the meaning of home may play an important role in the decision of whether or not to return. However, while migrants inherently include in their discourse multiple references about return, the above-mentioned studies also pinpoint that discourses of return are for many migrants mainly symbolic (return is constantly postponed for an indefinite future date) rather than centred around clear plans and strategies for return. In addition, there are multiple other factors, such as the continuous benchmarking of the situation in the homeland and the host society, which might play an essential role in the decision to return.

Klimt (2000) in his analysis of the Portuguese migrants in Germany finds a surprising commitment of these migrants to return to their ancestral home. The author explains these trends both from an economic perspective (savings obtained in Germany would 'last' longer in Portugal) and also symbolically (savings would grant them more cultural capital and prestige in their homeland). Moreover Klimt argues that the interviewees' commitment to return had also constituted a symbolic strategy through which they dismissed racism and discrimination and retained their sense of self-respect in the host society.

An interesting aspect emerges at this stage. While nostalgia usually operates by exaggerating the virtues of a country and forgetting the negative traits, the return to the homeland, even if it refers to a holiday, a temporary

return in between various periods of work abroad or a permanent return, will always prompt migrants to confront the 'real' and the idealised imagined country. This confrontation between the two images may lead to intense feelings of disappointment. Andits (2010) notes for example that this was the case for the Hungarian diaspora in Australia but also of other diasporas from the former communist countries who underwent euphoria and high expectations post-1989 when they saw a great possibility for homecoming and reintegration as well as a crucial role for themselves in rebuilding the nation. According to the author, when their expectations were not met, feelings of bitterness and disillusionment set in the diasporic relation to their homelands. Moreover media from the country of origin may also significantly contribute to an increased diasporic interest in the original homeland (Appadurai, 1996) and to a re-adjusting of the idealised image of their homeland, by bringing the 'true' images of home closer to the migrants and diasporas.

There can also be situations when nostalgia operates against all perceived problems with the homeland and the home country becomes loved for (or in spite of) its perceived failures (Sandu, 2010). For example, in their interviews with a wide range of returned Romanian migrants, Rostaș and Stoica (2006) found that issues such as potholes on the streets, thieves and dirt became juxtaposed with other key aspects such as friends and family, beautiful sights etc. in the enumeration of the things that are missed about the country while being abroad. In these cases, nostalgia seemed to operate by including even some of the more negative aspects in the construction of their imagined homeland. Thus the country of origin becomes loved for all that it is, with good and bad aspects, things that we are proud as well as things that we are ashamed of.

According to many authors, nostalgia is not the single manifestation of involvement with the home (Andits, 2010) and these nostalgia-premised definitions of diaspora (Tsagarousianou, 2004) tend to be quite limited. In Parekh's (2008) view, the participation of citizens in the state's ceremonies and rituals as well as their involvement in the everyday life of the State (such as voting, debating on national issues, expressing anger or pride in these issues) are also important forms of manifestation of national attachment and belonging. Furthermore the author notes that self-respect can rarely be separated from the respect for their country, and, at the same time, its defamation is experienced as a personal affront (p.57).

These 'double-voiced homeland discourses' (Bakhtin, 1981 cited in Andits, 2010) are particularly important when we discuss the issue of ethnic and diasporic identities. On the one hand they help us comprehend the dynamics of emotions which these groups often hold about their homelands. It provides the premises for understanding that the love and hate for their homeland may in reality be just two sides of the same coin. On the other hand, Parekh's argument also provides an insight into the reason why media representations (in relation to their home country or their co-nationals) may constitute extremely sensitive matters for ethnic and diasporic communities.

What emerges from the arguments discussed to this point is that the imagining of, and identification with, 'the home' can lead to very powerful emotions, ranging from love to hate, from pride to shame, guilt and embarrassment depending on whether the country conforms to the individuals' ideals and goals for the country or, on the contrary, fails to do so (Parekh, 2008, p.62; but also Andits, 2010).

Capturing this dynamic of pride and shame contained in the diasporic narratives of home, several studies show that while some aspects (such as the country's natural beauty, its people, etc.) may make them feel proud, other aspects (such as the political processes, corruption, etc.) may be the target of very critical remarks (Georgiou, 2001; Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; Devlin Trew, 2010).

In their research on adolescents from the former Soviet Union who have migrated with their parents to Israel, Elias and his colleagues note a certain need to reaffirm their collective homeland identities by expressing nostalgia and pride in being Russian at the same time as feelings of cultural superiority towards the 'native' teenagers (Elias et al., 2007).

While this superiority is sometimes built against the native population as in the case mentioned by Elias et al. (2007), there are also instances when ethnic minorities and diasporas express superiority towards the homeland. Diasporas' manifest desires to maintain their original traditions and re-create the past leads these groups to pose at times as the only keepers of "authentic home cultures" (Shi, 2005; Georgiou, 2001; 2006; Andits, 2010).

Moreover several studies also hint at the fact that migrants perceive themselves to be quite different from their co-nationals in the home country and this is often the outcome of the considerable impact of migration on the lives of diasporic groups. The report coordinated by Sandu (2006) indicates that the former Romanian migrants who were interviewed for the study all point to a

change in mentality as one of the most significant consequences. On the one hand, living abroad impacts indirectly on these mentalities: an improvement in their financial situation will bring about changes to their lives and the way they interpret their surrounding environment. On the other hand there is also a direct impact insofar as, as a traveller abroad, one can experience interactions with people from various backgrounds, thus acquiring a more cosmopolitan mentality[14]. The reports also finds that migration had a positive impact on the work ethic. Another study (Andits, 2010) talks about the self-assumed moral purity of the émigré, which in the case of diasporas of the former communist states translates into a lack of collaboration with the communism regime (Andits, 2010).

All these elements contribute to an increasing feeling both on the part of the migrants as well as on the part of the homeland societies that, in spite of their shared nationality, there are also significant differences to be considered. Upon return (either temporary or permanent) these distinctions may contribute to a feeling of alienation experienced by the former migrants either due to self-exclusion and feelings of not-belonging (Rostaș and Stoica, 2006) or due to exclusion by the wider community (Popov, 2010).

According to Sheffer (1995) this latter aspect has been ignored by existing literature as current studies have been silent about the reactions of their home countries and their institutions towards diasporas. In his analysis of the emergence of ethno-national groups, Sheffer focuses on the homeland's attitudes towards their diasporas and argues that home societies tend to be rather indifferent to issues pertaining to diasporas and their existence. Furthermore, in the authors' view, homeland governments manifest ambivalence and sometimes cynicism towards diasporas, mainly because of concerns related to their alleged dual loyalty and the diminished possibility of politically controlling these diasporas (:125).

Referring in particular to the Romanian case, Diminescu (2009) pointed out that the Romanian government has to a great extent ignored the phenomenon of migration and the increasing thickening of Romanian diasporas abroad mainly because it mirrored its failures. As a consequence the government avoided talking about migration as if it were an embarrassing disease (p.56). This 'exclusion' from the national discourse may render

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[14] It is interesting to note that the report finds no support for the hypotheses that working abroad brings more ethnic and religious tolerance.

diasporas more prone to a discourse of anxiety, distrust and feelings of being abandoned in relation to their homelands (Andits, 2010; Trandafoiu, 2006).

As it could be noted many interesting aspects emerge in relation to the diasporic-home dimension. Skinner (1993) provides a beautiful summary of the fraught relation between diasporas and their homelands as he argues that

> [r]elations between peoples in diasporas and their ancestral homelands are complex and full of dialectical contradictions. First, there is anger, bitterness, and remorse among exiles - and often among people at home – over the weakness that permitted the dispersion to occur. Second, there is conflict when the dominant hosts attempt to justify the subordinate status of the exiles, and the latter, in turn, refuse to accept the status thrust on them. Often the dominant groups display contempt for the homelands of their victims, and the latter feel constrained to defend the countries from which they or their ancestors came […] if a return does occur, there is frequently a conflict between the returnees and the resident populations (p.11)

In conclusion, the relation developed by ethnic minorities and diasporas with their ancestral homes is very important for the development of their identity narrative. Some scholars (Chan, 2005, Hylland Ericksen, 2006) see this involvement with 'the home' as an extension of nationalism, or, as Anderson names it, a 'long-distance nationalism'. However, literature indicates that the connection to homeland represents more than a re-enacting of the previous national identities; its manifestations are multiple and very complex, and thus cannot be confined to national loyalty or to nostalgia. Transnational migrants have complex affiliations, they organise their lives on a different, expanded basis.

3.2 Host society: assimilation or multilocal attachments?

The discourse around the topic of ethnic minorities or diasporas and the host society usually revolved around issues of integration. While assimilationist theories have lost considerable ground in favour of the more 'relaxed' policies of multiculturalism, integration, understood as active involvement with the host society and a certain degree of conformity to the majority norms, has always been demanded from migrants.

The first chapter of the thesis noted that besides any policy models of integration (or, in some cases, in spite of their absence) minority groups often construct, according to their personal aims and desires, different paths to integration. These paths will however always imply a mix of 'home' and 'host' as old and new rituals, traditions, and cultural symbols become enmeshed in their newly forged identities.

For diasporas and ethnic minorities there is never a clear break with the past (Fludernik, 2003) as they continue to cross back and forth the symbolic borders of the homeland and the host society, thus developing multilocale attachments (Chan, 2005). One of the most acclaimed writers on cultural hybridity, Homi Bhabha, identified an 'interstitial passage', where cultures meet and merge (Bhabha, 1994, p.4), and defined hybridity as a process that outlines the subversive character of alterity within identity, and a way "in which hybrid subjects are enabled to manipulate features of one identity frame for the purpose of refunctionalization in another" (Bhabha in Fludernik, 2003, p.xxiii).

There are multiple references in the literature to the various forms in which transnational belonging is expressed by migrants. Pnina Werbner (2003) talks about the adoption of a series of new rituals from the host society in parallel with a hybridisation of existing habits and rituals (e.g. the hybrid wedding rituals of Pakistani living in Britain). Sandu (2010) finds that transnational involvement of Romanian migrants is reflected in their parallel financial investments in the homeland and host society (e.g. starting a business while still holding a job or a business abroad; or buying houses and cars both 'at home' and abroad).

The diversity of these 'indicators' of transnational belonging is vast, thus rendering the effort to enumerate them rather unachievable. What is interesting to note are the mechanisms and strategies employed by minorities themselves in order to become accepted or perhaps even assimilated by the host societies.

One of the most common strategies confirmed by empirical studies refers to naming. Becker (2009) feels that naming strategies can be linked with the identity that parents want for their child. The author explains the appeal of this strategy by contrasting it to other means of assimilation or integration and ascertains that while other strategies require significantly higher investments (e.g. learning a language), choosing a first name for their children bears no associated material costs (p.202). Therefore Becker concludes that naming practices tend to measure real behaviours, rather than just attitudes or intentions.

Gerhards and Hans (2006) note that first names are not only markers of one's personal, but also of one's social identity. Therefore, the choice of a name which is specific to the host society represents a voluntary and desired identification with that society on the part of immigrants. Isaacs (1975) also agrees that names noticeably signify group identity, and attributes their decision to change the name to an effort to "mitigate or conceal inferior status, to be more 'like' the more favoured group, to gain some more comfortable anonymity by sharing, at least in name, the identity of the dominant group" (p.51).

Media representations and existing social attitudes on cultural diversity in the host country are often assumed to lead to important consequences in terms of the strategies that ethnics and diasporas develop in relation to integration and sense of belonging (EUMC, 2006a). Sheffer (1995) notes that many host societies, in spite of their increasing tolerance of pluralism and multiculturalism manifest an increasing tendency towards conservatism, nationalism, racism and discrimination.

Thus, in response to perceived hostility in the host society, minorities may chose to voice their concerns and construct their identities against these stereotypes. Arendt (1968 cited in Madianou, 2005) for example argues that when an identity is under attack, the only viable response is embracing that identity. Other studies (Riccio, 2001; EUMC, 2006a; Ryan, 2007) provide similar evidence.

In other cases, negative representations and attitudes may lead to stigma and a desire to conceal their ethnic identities. Ryan (2007) exemplifies this situation, by outlining the identity strategies of Irish nurses in Britain in the critical moments following the IRA bombings. The author points out that some of these strategies included: self-censoring of some of the aspects which are revealed about the self (e.g. openly discussing their Irish roots and their Irishness), refraining from wearing the shamrock symbol around St. Patrick's or

even changing the accent (and becoming more Scottish). In the case of Romanian migrants several studies point to the negative image that Romanians have about themselves and to the perceived negative image in the eyes of the others (Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; ANBCC, 2005) and this in turn leads to strong feelings of stigma associated with the 'Romanian' label.

The issue of stigma has a long-standing history in psychology, and Erving Goffman (1990 [1963]) has engaged with the concept in an effort to explain the feelings of inferiority developed by certain categories marked out by society due to 'abominations of the body' and 'blemishes of individual character' (p.4) (e.g. people formerly institutionalised or imprisoned). He also pays attention to the important issues associated with the stigma of race, nation and religion.

Goffman outlines several responses developed by individuals in order to deal with their stigmatised identities. On the one hand, people may attempt to correct what they see as the objective basis of their failing. On the other hand, they may strive to correct their shortcomings indirectly by devoting effort to master areas of activity felt to be close or incidental to their shortcomings. He also highlights the tendency of the stigmatised individual to be self-conscious and to calculate the impression he is making. The anticipated reactions from others may induce the stigmatized a 'defence cowering' attitude. This is accentuated by that fact that while aware of his 'failing', the stigmatised person becomes mindful of the fact that the failing is something that he cannot fix and this results in shame and insecurity. Goffman further adds that in some cases a constant oscillation between the cowering attitude and bravado may also be noted (p.29).

Last but not least, Goffman talks about the desire of the stigmatised to ally themselves with 'the normals' because in this manner they will see themselves more in non-stigmatic terms (p.131). He alludes to the tendency of some of the stigmatised individuals to acquire a personal identity other than their own and argues that a "personal name is usually the issue, because of all identity pegs it seems to be the one most generally employed and at the same time the one that is in certain ways easiest to tamper with" (p.76).

While Goffman's main focus was not the negotiation of cultural identity, these strategies can confidently be extrapolated to the case of diasporic and ethnic communities' identity construction in the context of perceived discrimination and stigma associated with their cultural identities. Moreover Goffman states that it is important to understand these strategies especially in

cases when stigma represents a condition that appears unexpectedly: while the author exemplifies this situation with the case of a person who got Polio and hence turned from a 'normal' person into a stranger overnight, multiple parallels can be drawn to the condition of the migrant, a person who is regarded as 'normal' when they live in their own country, but as 'strangers' (which may become stigmatised) the very moment they 'trespass' and become enmeshed into 'our' worlds.

An aspect which was only briefly mentioned by Goffman but which is widely discussed in other studies refers to the sense of cultural superiority towards the majority (or as Goffman calls it the 'bravado'). This constitutes a strategic resource that minorities may use as leverage in their identity discourses, one which aids them to deal with their sense of inferiority and stigma. The previous section has already made several references to the study of Elias and his colleagues (2007) but also to studies discussing diasporas' perceived superiority in relation to their home cultures. Furthermore it is interesting from this point of view to note Berger and Mohr's (1989) work on migrant workers in Europe. In their exposé, they point out that migrants perceive themselves to be "stronger and have more stamina and more cunning than the inhabitants of the foreign city" (p.67). While outwardly migrants tend to accept a sense of inferiority, inwardly a migrant will "call upon his pride to remind himself who he is and what he has already achieved [and] [t]he greatest of his achievements is that he is working here" (p.118).

Symbolic inversion refers to another potential strategy that stigmatised minorities may employ in order to gradually transform a particular identity "from a badge of shame and source of negative stereotyping into an unequivocal source of pride" (Leal, 2002, p.235). Thus, minorities may appeal to their customs and cultural artefacts as symbols of their authentic past, which are then transformed into potent identity symbols (p.236, but also Hall, 1994 [1992]).

Last but not least several studies point to 'scapegoating' as a strategy to cope with the stigma associated with particular group identities. By passing on the blame and by re-attributing the stereotypes to other groups, individuals strive to liberate their group's identity from the negative connotations and the stigma associated to it. Ryan (2007) for example discusses how Irish nurses have negotiated their identities by engaging with the negative stereotypes typically associated with 'being Irish' and re-assigning them to those Irish people from the lower social classes and to those who drank (Ryan, 2007).

In conclusion, members of an ethnic or diasporic group may engage in a wide range of strategies aimed at shaking off the stigma associated with one's identity. And by doing so, migrants sometimes aim at reinforcing the boundaries between them and the host society, while in other instances they might aim to fade the clear-cut distinctions. It is important however to note that diasporic identities will always constitute hybrid identities that are negotiated at the intersection of multiple spheres of identification: with home and with host, but also with many 'Other' groups.

3.3 Us and the other 'Others': groups, political entities and symbolic geographies

When outlining the range of identity markers which members of an ethnic or diasporic group may choose from in the construction of their identity, it is important to look beyond references to 'home' and 'host' in the identitarian discourse. Thus, we need to take a closer look at the relations that a particular diaspora develops with the 'Other' groups and to understand how identity negotiation takes place in connection (and sometimes competition) with these groups. It is also equally important to investigate the use of other key referents (of political, geographical or symbolic nature) in the identity discourses[15]. Last but not least, several factors which constitute the main markers of difference within a diaspora will be discussed. Thus, due to the fact that diasporas are far from being a homogenous group with a single identity, it is also important to take into consideration the multiple 'us vs. them' dimensions within diaspora itself.

Us and 'them' – Romanians' discourse of the cultural others

The importance of the relation between a particular group and the other ethnic groups or diasporas has often been downplayed by studies which have focused entirely on the home-host dichotomy. Sheffer (1995) argues in favour of widening our understanding of inter-group interactions, given the fierce competition between ethnic groups/diasporas which may at times generate tensions and conflict.

In an overwhelming majority, studies have focused on racism and discrimination strictly in connection with the mainstream/minority dimension, thereby neglecting the fact that racism and stereotyping may also be a feature of the relationship between diasporas themselves (Georgiou, 2001). This issue is also confirmed by several Romanian migration studies which seem to show that while Romanians abroad usually have a good relationship with the locals, they often find it more difficult to interact with other minorities (Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; Cinpoeș, 2009). Cinpoeș (2009) blames this on the lack of exposure to multiculturalism in Romania which allegedly prevents them from understanding multicultural societies by acting as an inhibitor of socialisation outside the sphere

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[15] Due to the significant number of potential markers of identification, this chapter is geared towards the referents which emerged as significant for Romanians.

of 'the similars' and 'the familiars'. While Romania may not yet constitute a country of immigration, one can hardly speak of a lack of exposure to multiculturalism since national ethnic minorities (e.g. Hungarian, Rroma, German, Ukrainian etc.) make up more than 10% of Romanian citizens[16]. Moreover Cinpoeș's idea simply re-iterates the classical argument brought forward by Allport's contact hypotheses which, in spite of its appealing simplicity, has been countless times rejected by empirical research.

These relations however are not always constructed in negative terms. There are multiple examples in the Romanian literature which point towards the conclusion that other diasporas may act as models for the Romanians: for example, 'the others' are perceived to be 'more united', to have more rights or be better at fighting for their rights etc. (Trandafoiu, 2009; Rostaș and Stoica, 2006).

There is not yet a consistent body of literature devoted to the various relations developed between ethnic groups or diasporas, as studies around this topic are only recently emerging (Moliner (2007) - interactions between the Panjabi Sikhs and Muslims in post-colonial Britain; and Baser (2011) – the relations between the Turkish and the Kurdish minorities in Germany). The interactions between Romanian migrants and other diasporas have been briefly noted in several studies (Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; Fox, 2001), but no study has focused on the exploration of the role that these others (and many other significant groups) play in the construction and negotiation of the group's identity.

East, West, EU, non-EU

Another important marker of identity which emerges as significant for diasporas originating from 'the East' is the constant reference and sometimes opposition to 'the West'. Starting with Edward Said's book on _Orientalism_ (1995 [1978]) and moving on to the storied experiences of Salman Rushdie's book[17], the East and the West appear as symbolic spaces which become infused with multiple meanings in the process of identity construction.

Discussing the particular case of the post-communist countries, Sampson (1998 cited in Mai, 2004) argues that while initially the West was

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[16] Romanian Census, 2002 (Source: http://www.insse.ro)
[17] _East, West,_ 1995.

imagined *in absence*, as a fantasised and utopian place of escape, following the collapse of the communist regimes, the Occident then soon became an overwhelming presence within people consciousness.

According to Diminescu (2009), for Romanians, the East/West dimension poses an important question of belonging: having been for centuries under the influence of the Turkish[18] and then the Russian empire[19], the emblematic return to Europe becomes of particular importance. Accordingly, the issue of European integration acquires a strong symbolic charge for Romanians, as 'belonging to the European space' is equated to belonging to the Occidental world.

Diminescu (2009) further argues that while 'entering Europe' (i.e. being granted access to the European Union) has been an inevitable process, the accession process has also entailed an imperative to build a more secure border towards the east, a border which would become the new outer border between the EU and the east. Romania, was thus constrained to construct 'a common Other' which would thereby become an important identity marker. The East then became a synonym for the space situated at the boundary of Europe, a place that starkly contrasts with the luring West.

Consequently, Romania was included by the other EU members into their constructed 'East' and this may explain why Frese (forthcoming) finds that Romania's image in the European cultural and political landscape often exemplifies the polarisation which opposes the civilised West to the retrograde and threatening East, which implies that, in spite of their desire to belong to the West, Romanians are in many cases still portrayed as the Eastern others.

It becomes thus evident that there is a certain degree of overlap between the symbolic geographies of 'East' and 'West' and the formal political entities, namely Europe and the European Union.

Looking at the Romanians' feelings and perceptions towards the European Union, it emerges that these tend to be in stark contrast to their image of their country (European Commission, 2001; Rostaș and Stoica, 2006). The Commission's report points out that while there is the perception that accession represents a historical necessity, an opportunity and a pressing obligation, Romanians feel that their country is in a state of unparalleled dilapidation and chaos (p.6). The report also states that, in comparison with the other accession

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[18] Two Romanian Principates (Ţara Românească and Moldova) have been dominated by the Ottoman Empire from the end of the XV century, while Transylvania became an independent Principate vassal to the Ottoman Empire from 1526). Romanian Principates achieved their independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878.
[19] The eastern part of Moldova (Basarabia) was occupied by the Russian empire in 1812 until the end of the WW1, when it was returned (for a short while) to the Romanian state.

countries, Romanians were by far the most enthusiastic and they recognised in joining the European Union a symbolic return to the European family, "a historical and cultural community endowed with great power and richness to which they pledge their allegiance with unbounded passion and faith" (p.51).

Europe (and in particular the EU) is thus also perceived by Romanians as the equivalent of civilization and education (European Commission, 2001; Rostaș and Stoica, 2006), a place where they are 'home' in spite of their eastern geographical belonging.

The regional element

Regional affiliations also seem to play a strong role in the identity discourses. As Devlin Trew (2010) highlights, in some cases the 'regional' and the local' may even function as alternatives to the national forms of identification. This was illustrated by his case study of Northern Irish migrants who seem to express a stronger connection to the local level of their region, country or village, rather than claiming a national territorial identity.

In the case of Romanian migrants abroad the regional aspect becomes particularly important. The very structure of Romanian migration is one that has a very strong regional character. The study coordinated by Sandu (2006) presents the statistical profile of the Romanian migration which clearly indicates that, in the first decade following the collapse of the Communist regime (1990-2001), certain regions from Romania manifest a strong tendency for migrating to particular destinations[20]. Following 2001, according to the same report, the degree of regionalisation considerably diminishes.

Diminescu (2009) even talks about the 'regrouping' of Romanian migrants abroad: for example all peasants from Certeze[21] are selling newspapers on the belt around Paris; in the same line, all villagers from Corod migrate in search of work to the Padua region, those from Borșa village to Milan and from Sâmbăta de Sus to Rome. Many migrants "manage" and successfully combined the informal and formal channels.

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[20] Moldova was oriented towards Italy and Israel, Dobrogea towards Italy, but also Germany; Transylvania towards Hungary; Muntenia towards Turkey; Oltenia towards Canada and Bucharest towards Greece.

[21] Considered the richest village in Romania.

While these regional perspectives refer to the divisions existing within the national borders, there are also regional forms of identification that surpass the national boundaries. An example of this type of identity marker is with reference to the Balkans. Balkanism often appears in the Romanian discourse. However while the concept denotes a geopolitical and cultural region in the Southeast of Europe, for Romanians it has acquired a symbolic connotation referring to the social acceptability of small trickeries and flexibility of the laws.

All these aspects prompt Bleahu to conclude that while Romanians are clearly transnational, they are at the same time regional (Bleahu, 2006). The regional and local forms of identification thus are crucial in the diasporic context.

The multiple us – defining ourselves

Whether we talk about the diasporic relation to home, to host or simply with the other diasporic groups, diaspora is assumed to be a homogeneous group, one that employs one single identity discourse. It is often assumed that people feel a sort of attachment to their ethnic or diasporic communities merely because they all share a certain homeland. Therefore some studies routinely expect that in time, diasporic relations will develop (Frese, forthcoming) and awareness of their commonality will arise. In reality, the relationships within a diaspora are frequently fraught with tensions and multiple lines of divisions emerge in their identity discourses.

Several studies make references to the importance of factors such as age (Scully, 2009; Trandafoiu, 2009), gender (Ryan, 2007; Scully, 2009), occupational status (Barker and Galasinski, 2001; Ryan, 2007), religion (Barker and Galasinski, 2001; Georgiou, 2001; Sanders, 2002; Ryan, 2007)

Migration statute as well as the length of time spent abroad also creates lines of difference between diaspora members. Trandafoiu (2009) finds a double distinction between the settled migrants and the newly arrived. On the one hand, the settled migrants are the key players in charge of those narratives of hope, doubt, success and failure that help create the image of the 'ideal' migrant, mainly because they have accepted the inherent humiliations, and emerged as long-term winners in spite of adversities. At the same time, the new migrants may take the 'old' types of migrants as objects of the ridicule.

Other studies point to the importance of language, dialect and accent as key ethnic identifiers (Bourdieu, 1991; Barker and Galasinski, 2001). Buchanan

(1979) sees a close link between language as an important marker of identity difference and social class. The author points out that upper class Haitians in New York who have suffered downward economic and social mobility tend to speak French to mark their difference from the Creoles.

Social class is also one of the most important factors. This factor is increasingly being recognised by diasporic identity studies as a key contributor to the shaping of identity discourses (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Morley, 2001; Barker and Galasinski, 2001; Bobek, 2009; Scully, 2009). Referring to the case of the Turkish community in Netherlands, Christine Ogan (2001) argues that certain class identities tend to be stronger than any other forms of identification.

Besides these lines of distinction which produce a variety of diasporic identity narratives, the image that the members of a diasporic group have about themselves as 'nationals' of a particular country or as members of that particular diaspora also plays a considerable role. For this purpose it is interesting to look at the very few studies focused on the image that Romanians have of their country and of themselves.

One of the most common findings shows that Romanians perceive themselves as a group that does not stand united (Trandafoiu, 2009; Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; Frese, forthcoming). Some authors attribute this lack of cohesiveness to the legacy of communism (Frese, forthcoming). This has a strong impact on the process of association in the wider sense and also on the acquisition of a common consciousness that is vital for the construction of a diasporic identity.

The empirical findings of these above-mentioned studies also point to the fact that, for example, Romanians abroad are oriented more towards friendships with other nationals rather than their own co-citizens; they speak the host community language in order to conceal their identity; and, as bosses, they exploit their co-nationals.

Referring to the desire to associate at the destination several studies (Mihai, 2006; Bleahu, 2006; Ștefănescu, 2006, Păun, 2006) argue that while Romanian migrants in various host country contexts have initially associated around churches[22], the recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of formal associations and organisations (leading on certain occasion even to

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[22] The church is an important source of information about rights, entitlements and obligations, also helps them overcome isolation (Ștefănescu, 2006) and also acts as a job channel (Păun, 2006).

competition). In spite of this, the general tendency is for Romanians to avoid associating with one another (Mihai, 2006).

While the lack of desire to associate with other Romanians clearly points to a lack of trust in their co-citizens, there is also the possibility that people understand community bonding differently (Georgiou, 2006). The same idea is highlighted by Sreberny (2000) in her study of Iranians in London. She points out that while Iranianness tends to be expressed in various kinds of performances that bring people together, it doesn't necessarily build any long term clear sense of community.

Findings of previous studies show that Romanians do not hold a positive image of themselves and that their image in the eyes of the others is rather negative (Păun, 2006; ANBCC, 2005; Rostaș and Stoica, 2006). Media in particular are perceived to paint an ugly portrait of Romanians by focusing on the horror stories about Romanians abroad who are working in the black economy, accusing them of being involved in crime – stealing, prostitution and beggary (Annual Early Warning Report, 2003). The report argues that Romanian media are also picking up these stories which tend to emphasise the Roma origin of the culprits (:33).

Several studies (Trandafoiu, 2009; Frese, forthcoming) find a strong anti-gypsy tone in the diasporic discourse. In the context of the country of destination, Gypsies become more visible in comparison to their residential and social segregation back in Romania.

In conclusion, the image that a particular group has about itself is crucial for shaping their identity narratives. Also when we consider the identity discourse of a diasporic community, the multiple dimensions of distinction within that particular community become key for understanding the various voices engaged in the construction of the greater identity narrative.

Summary and conclusions

This chapter has commenced with an analysis of some of the key manifestations of diasporic engagement with the home and host society. In relation to the home country, the main idea put forward was that while the national culture is considered to be the primary source of cultural identity, nostalgia is not necessarily the only form of diasporic attachment to the symbolic space of homeland. In reality there is a complex interplay between anger and pride in one's home country, between love and hate. Several examples have been discussed in relation to the perceived feelings of superiority which diaspora might develop in relation to both the country of origin and destination.

While there is a lot of emphasis put on the relation between migrants and their homelands, diasporic identities are hardly exclusively anchored in their communities of origin. Thus, the issues of transnational belonging and the relations that ethnics or diasporas develop with the host society are also very important. Hence, the second part of the chapter discussed the main mechanisms and strategies employed by minorities themselves in order to become accepted or even assimilated in the countries of destination.

Having to often face hostile feelings and discrimination in host societies migrants sometimes develop strategies to mitigate or conceal their inferior status. One of the most common practices of dealing with the issue of stigmatised identities is the practice of 'naming'. Many authors argued that the name represents more than a personal identifier, but, at the same time, is strongly linked to the group identity. In their view, the main advantage of this particular mechanism is that it represents a very efficient and costless effort to be more like the majoritarian 'other'. Besides the practice of 'naming' other mechanisms have been brought into the discussion: a 'defence cowering attitude' or bravado, symbolic inversion and scapegoating.

The final section of the chapter engages with the role of other important markers in the process of ethnic and diasporic identity construction. Thus, the role of the multiple 'others' (which may represent groups, political, geographical or even symbolic entities) has been highlighted.

Last but not least the issues pertaining to the key lines of division within a particular diaspora have been discussed. These aspects are important to note in order to point out that diasporic groups are never homogenous entities employing a single, coherent identity discourse.

In conclusion, diasporas tend to develop a complex relation with both the home and the host country and this implies that their identities are constructed at the intersection between the homeland and the host society. Moreover the existence of the other key identity referents demonstrates that any group identity tends to be constructed at the confluence of various narratives and spheres of belonging. As Cornell and Hartmann (1997) point out, these sites of identity construction are difficult to separate from one another, but are in fact inter-linked.

Part 2 Approaches to methodology

Chapter 4 - Background to the case study

Overview of Romanian migration studies

Anghel & Horvath (2009) argue that migration is one of the social processes that have profoundly influenced the post-communist Romanian society. Estimations show that about a third of the adult Romanian population who are now still living in the country have, at least once in their lives, migrated for work abroad.

However Romanian migration research is still in its exploratory phase (Sandu, 2006). Nevertheless, Anghel & Horvath (2009) suggest the interest in studying Romanians' migration has increased over the years. Hence several studies have begun to emerge (Sandu et al., 2004; Sandu, 2005; ANBCC, 2005; Nedelcu, 2008; Potot, 2008; Cucuruzan & Vasilache, 2009; Trandafoiu, 2009) and these works constitute the main pillars of this field of study.

Many of the existing studies tend to focus on the economic aspects of migration and on the strategies that Romanians develop in order to leave the country and to 'manage' in the country of destination. From this perspective the accumulation and the use of resources (financial, but also social capital and networks) in the migration process have been emphasised (Sandu, 2005; Elrick and Ciobanu, 2009; Bleahu, 2003; ANBCC, 2005). There are however more and more indications of a new strand of research emerging, one that focuses on the lives of the Romanian migrants in the host countries (e.g. Sandu, 2010).

While most of the existing scholarship on Romanian migration has focused on the actual migration process, very few studies have endeavoured to understand migrants at the destination point. This is perhaps understandable when we consider the financial challenges faced by Romanian research as well as the fact that Romanian communities abroad have never been the main focus of researchers based in the countries of destination simply because other migrant communities were more numerous than Romanians, thus rendering the latter 'invisible'.

Recent studies seem to have extended their focus to the important issues of diasporic political mobilisation (Trandafoiu, 2009); community formation (Frese, forthcoming) and media representation (Romocea, forthcoming), however they have only briefly referred to the identity construction

process. Moreover, with a few exceptions (Nedelcu, 2008, Trandafoiu, 2009), there are almost no studies that engage with Romanians online: either as users of the new communication technologies, or as 'members' of online diasporas.

Thus, while the body of research on the topic of Romanian migration is indeed on the increase, significant gaps still remain in terms of understanding Romanian communities abroad, their identity discourses and how these are constructed at the confluence of various identity narratives of 'us and them' and, more importantly the articulation of these discourses in the online space.

Existing data on Romanians migration patterns, trends, profiles

A brief look at the history of Romanian migration abroad highlights the fact that during the Communist regime there were enormous limitations to the freedom of travel which meant that very few people had actually a chance to travel outside the borders, let alone to emigrate. However, according to Anghel & Horvath (2009) those that managed to escape and cross the border (fraudulently in most cases) had, during this particular period, a significant chance to get their status legalised and to be assisted by the host societies in the integration process. The authors furthermore point out that this approach to migration in Europe is considerably different from the current "Fortress Europe" attitude towards migration. But while this period may indeed have been more beneficial for those that escaped the repressive regime in Romania, history is somewhat silent about the many dramatic stories of those who were caught in their attempt to flee the country.

Pointing to the rarity of migration during the Communist regime, Rostaș & Stoica (2006) argue that after 1989 the possibility to travel freely abroad constitutes a major accomplishment, one that tends to be perceived by Romanians as even more important than free elections, the emergence of the private sector or freedom of speech in the media. Diminescu (2009) even talks about a certain Romanian obsession (or perhaps a disease) of travelling abroad.

Analysing the statistical profile of Romanian migrants abroad, the report coordinated by Sandu (2006) points out that while the initial migration was predominantly male, following 2001 the gender balance has been restored. According to the report, shortly after the 1989 Revolutions (i.e. between 1990-1994) there was a period of exploration when small entrepreneurs or, as Diminescu (2009) calls them, the 'luggage-salesmen' used to migrate abroad for

seasonal work and small commerce to countries such as Turkey, Israel as well as several countries in the Western Europe. This period is also characterised by the last waves of ethnic migration to Germany, Hungary and Israel[23].

Also during this period (1990-1994) we encounter a strong trend of Roma (Gypsy) migration to all countries in Eastern Europe and Turkey (where they engaged in commerce), but also to countries in Western Europe (e.g. Germany, Italy, England and Ireland) as asylum seekers (Jeler, 2006; Diminescu, 2009).

Diminescu (2009) notes that while Roma have been strongly stigmatised and constituted the main targets of the "fortress politics carried out by the Occidental powers" (p.48), they have responded with "an exceptional culture of mobility and adaptation to poor living conditions and thus the Roma communities have managed to maintain themselves in mobility and to develop one of the most surprising migration economies" (p.48).

This period also coincides with the reactivation of the migration networks (especially the neo-protestant networks that had been "frozen" during the Communist regime) (Diminescu, 2009).

The following period (1994-2000) is described by many Romanian migration researchers as a period of strong crisis for Romanian migrants as the Occident was beginning to close its doors to migrants at the same time as Romania was going through one of its worst economic and political crises (Diminescu, 2009). The range of destinations that Romanian migrants chose during this period started to diversify as more and more migrants oriented themselves towards countries such as Italy and Spain (which are today the two biggest destinations for Romanian migrants). Other countries such as Greece and Portugal, Turkey and Israel move further up the list of top destinations, and new places of destination such as Canada, Ireland, Great Britain and USA also make their way on to the list of favoured destinations.

Much of this migration is temporary and seasonal, mainly constructed around the agricultural calendar. Working in the construction sector (for men) and in the sphere of domestic work (for women) is also typical for this period. These migrants are perceived by Diminescu (2009) as a sort of commuters since they were often pendulating between 'here' and 'there'.

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[23] According to Cornell and Hartmann (1997) this is the last phase after the politics of the 1950s-1960s when the Romanian government gradually reorganised power relations in the society under the slogan "Romania for the ethnic Romanians". This campaign encouraged the emigration of Germans and Jews (in order to diminish their numbers); it involved the withdrawal of certain rights from the Hungarian minority and it also reduced the presence of minorities in governmental positions and in the governing of the PCR [The Romanian Communist Party].

From 2000 onwards migration of Romanians amplifies. Firstly January 1st 2002 marks the beginning of free travel in the Schengen area. Exactly 5 years later, Romania joined the European Union. Two parallel trends can be noticed. One is an intensification of the networked migration: families reunite and work is mainly 'guaranteed' by the verbal promises of those 'already there'. The other trend is supported by the government as the new institution of Migration of Labour Force takes shape in order to facilitate access and mediate work contracts abroad. Diminescu (2009) argues that this new institutional body aimed to compete with the informal networks which in many situations have not improved the living conditions of the migrants, but have rather pushed them deeper into poverty and a precarious situation in the countries of destination.

It is also worth noting that, while the profile of the Romanian exploratory migrants portrays them as male, married, graduates from vocational studies or high school and originating from an urban environment, the social composition of migrants is in recent years becoming more and more diversified.

Migration to Ireland

Ireland has never been one of the main migration destinations for Romanians (as was the case of Israel, Italy and Spain). At the surface level this may be explained by Ireland's remote location as well as the possible language difficulties (in comparison with the easiness Romanians have in comprehending Italian or Spanish due to their common Latin origin). Another (and perhaps more important) aspect is the fact that by the time the Celtic Tiger was well underway, Italy and Spain were already becoming popular destinations for Romanians. Moreover, given the strong networked character of Romanian migration it becomes apparent why Romanians have oriented themselves predominantly to these two countries.

Very little information is available statistically about the Romanian population living in Ireland. To a great extent all existing information is sourced from the last Census data recorded in 2006. The 2006 Census mentioned a number of 8492 Romanian-born residents[24]. It is important to note that this number may have been subject to change in recent years given the fact that in January 2007 Romania joined the European Union (hence the number of

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[24] Persons that are usually resident in the state and that were present in their usual residence on Census night.

Romanians in Ireland may have increased) and also given the recent demise of the Celtic Tiger and the onset of an economic crisis (which could in exchange imply that a significant number of Romanians have also left Ireland since then)[25].

It is interesting to note that about 10 per cent of respondents (calculated from the above total of 8492) do not declare their Romanian citizenship. It is very likely that this is the case of Romanians who have, in the meantime become naturalised and acquired Irish citizenship and at the same time desired to rid of Romanian citizenship/nationality. Since Romania, unlike many other EU states, allows for dual-citizenship it means that those who no longer hold Romanian citizenship are people who have either failed to renew their Romanian identity documents, or who have willingly renounced Romanian citizenship. Also a significant number of these cases may be constituted by children of Romanian migrants for whom parents have sought only Irish citizenship[26]. Both these aspects are quite important as they provide important clues to the process of diasporic identity construction and feelings of belonging.

The Census also indicates that Romanians tend to be heavily concentrated in Dublin (around 35 per cent living in the city). The rest are, according to the same data set, spread in very small communities throughout the country. Coupled with the information that is available from the Romanian Community and from the forum, smaller communities of Romanians are also living in Galway, Cork and Limerick. This seems to fit with existing theories about the concentration of migrants in the capital and bigger cities.

In relation to the gender ratio, Census data show that men constitute only slightly more than half of the number of Romanian migrants (54%). In relation to age, the Census states that most of the Romanian migrants can be found in the 25 to 44 age bracket (about 62 per cent of the total number of migrants) and this seems to fit the pattern of most other Eastern European migrants. The implications of this are numerous. On the one hand, as the census confirms, the Romanian community in Ireland is largely constituted by a labour active population. 70 per cent of males and 42 per cent of females were employed, the construction sector being the main employer for males (42 per cent) and the hotel and restaurant segment of activity employing most of the females (32 per cent).

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[25] The latest Census results (2011) are unfortunately not yet available.
[26] To which they are entitled if they have been legally resident in Ireland for three (out of the last four years).

On the other hand if we correlate this information with the DETE[27] statistics for the year 2006 we note that only 1266 work permits have been issued to Romanian citizens (some of them constitute new applications, while others were renewals) and this represents a significant drop from 2004 when a number of 2113 permits had been issued. When we compare the 2006 figure with that of the population between 25-44 years (5336) this reflects that Romanians tend to find alternative routes into the Irish labour markets: some have obtained residence papers (and implicitly the much-desired right to work) based either on asylum status, IBC (Irish Born Children), marriage or naturalisation. On the other hand this aspect may also point to the fact that many Romanians circumvent the work permit system by working in the black economy.

Also this aspect highlights the fact that the Romanian community in Ireland is a relatively new community. While very few of the initial migrants came as refugees, many came as economic migrants on work visas and permits and remained on the basis of IBC legislation. While Romanians (and Bulgarians) as the newly joined EU members still need work permits in order to get a job in Ireland, a special amendment to this rule meant that those who had been legally living in Ireland for two years before January 1st 2007 when Romania joined the EU were granted the automatic right to work in Ireland.

Census data also reveals that almost 60 per cent or Romanian respondents were married. This combined with the fact that the diaspora is very young means that a new generation is likely to emerge: a generation of children that is now both Irish and Romanian, and whose hybrid identity constructions would be quite interesting to observe in the future.

In terms of religion, Orthodox was the main religion of the group (55%). There are also Catholics, Adventists and Baptists; the latter two have a strong history of network migration as studies tend to indicate. The fact that the Romanian community in Ireland is mainly Orthodox also seems to be confirmed by the fact that the first community voluntary organisations have formed around the Orthodox core of the community in the early years (1978-1981).

It was only later (1998-2004) that more Romanian organisations and associations emerged, mostly on the basis of existing social ties and connections between its members.

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[27] Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (currently Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation)

Diasporic media production

In the case of the Romanian community, there have been several initiatives in the last couple of years to edit Romanian language newspapers and informational newsletters. Unfortunately most of these initiatives could not overcome some of the main challenges that diasporic media generally have to face, namely shortages of human and financial resources.

The history of these initiatives of diasporic media production is strongly interlinked with the shaping and formation of the Romanian community organisations in Ireland.

The first newspaper of the Romanian community in Ireland was called *Daybreak [Zori de Zi]* and it emerged from the Romanian organisation *Romanians New Life* that appeared in 2003. The purpose of this organisation was to reunite all Romanian entities in Ireland under one single umbrella. Following talks between the leaders of all these communities it was decided to reunite under the label *Romanian Community in Ireland* mainly because this was the name of the longest-established organisation[28]. Thus *Romanians New Life* was absorbed by the Romanian Community of Ireland. One single organisation (namely, *The Romanian Society*) was left out of this 'partnership' and this was mainly due to the reticence of its leader to give up his position of power. Following the merger, the newspaper *Daybreak* had been kept as a religious supplement available for all Romanian churches in Ireland (and then ceased its activity).

The newly launched (August 2003) newspaper, *Informaţia IRL*, became then the newspaper of the Romanians in Ireland. Its declared aim was to act as an Official Monitor, by publishing all laws, bills and official regulations which were relevant to Romanian migrants in Ireland. This was very relevant during this period which was marked by lack of clarity around the IBC applications, citizenship applications etc. Moreover the newspaper aimed to provide Romanians in Ireland with information about opportunities for furthering their education (e.g. English and computer classes etc.) The second aim, in the view of one of the initiators, was to improve the image of Romanians and of Romania in Ireland. Thus, the last page of the newspaper was in English and lots of positive aspects about Romanians were presented. For the first two years the

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[28] November 1st 1998.

newspaper was free and all expenses were supported from ads. The logistic support from Cairde[29] was also very important at this stage as they facilitated the printing of a significant part of the journal.

According to one of the initiator's statements, the newspaper was designed as an independent newspaper that serves the Romanian Community in Ireland (and implicitly their community organisation rather than being a newspaper emerged from the organisation itself.

The newspaper temporary stopped its activity in 2006, when one of the key members of the editorial team was deported. Following his return to Ireland in 2007, the activity of the newspaper was recommenced. Later the same year *The Romanian Society* members overturned their leader and decided to join forces with the RCI.

The newspaper was in various occasions the subject of conflicts between various parties. Some of the conflicts appeared around 2005-2006 between the forum members and its editors when the former have complained repeatedly about the poor quality of the material published, thus raising multiple questions about whether the so-called 'diasporic newspaper' actually represented them or not.

During 2008-2009 there were numerous arguments (both online and offline) between the members of the RCI and the editors of the newspaper in relation to the ownership of the journal. What emerges at the forefront of these conflicts is the rather confusing relation between the private ownership of the journal on the one hand and the newspaper contributors' 'belonging' to the RCI on the other. Thus, the issues of representation once again emerged in relation to whether the newspaper represents the voice of the RCI, of its individual editors, or that of the wider Romanian community in Ireland.

There were also conflicts within the editorial team and eventually the journal changed ownership to become nowadays *Actualitatea IRL*, a totally independent private newspaper aiming to represent the interests of Romanians in Ireland. While some of the old members of the editorial team remained involved, other new members were co-opted. There is however a marked conflict between some members of the current editorial team and the members of the RCI.

In spite of this fraught relationship between the various newspaper initiatives and the Romanian community organisations, it is important to note

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[29] A community development organisation working to tackle health inequalities among ethnic minority communities (Source: www.cairde.ie)

that the website and the forum have been a constant part of Romanians in Ireland. Started in (2004) the forum has stood the test of time in spite of its 'ups and downs' caused by several technical difficulties.

It is also worth noting at this stage the increasing popularity of the Facebook pages of the RCI (310 likes of this page) and that of Actualitatea IRL newspaper (1072 friends)[30].

Description of the forum

The forum emerged in 2004 when the website was taken over by the members of the umbrella community Romanian Community of Ireland. The website (hosted at http://www.romaniancommunity.net) has changed during the years, but it was designed as a portal of news pertaining to the community, the homeland or the host society. Updates are however available about the events organised by the Romanian Embassy in Ireland and the RCI on various occasions.

The forum represents the most dynamic part of the website and even during the times when the website was down due to several technical problems, the forum was always 'kept alive' through a direct link to the database of messages. It thus seems as if the forum acts as the 'heart of the community'.

The 'official' language of the forum is Romanian. However in many occasions a mix of the two languages was used, both in the titles of some of the sections as well as in the messages posted.

The look of the forum is rather plain and functional, thus containing very few visual elements besides the logo and the stylised name of the community. The logo and the website have been revamped several times throughout the years.

The forum is structured in fifteen sections[31], each containing a number of two up to eight sub-sections. Further, each subsection is split into threads of discussion which contain the posts made by users and the moderators on each particular topic. A brief look at the forum statistics highlights the fact that the

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[30] As of December 6th 2011.
[31] The sections are entitled: 1. Upgrade Issues; 2. Welcome; 3. General; 4. The Romanian Community of Ireland; 5. Romanian Embassy; 6. Offtopic; 7. Emigration (Immigration); 8. Section dedicated to the gender 'conflicts'; 9. Culture and innovation; 10. Family; 11. Advertising; 12. Medical Forum; 13. Education; 14. Entertainment; 15. For specialists.

most prolific sub-section is the 'General Matters' category which contains a number of 512 discussion threads and 8462 posts[32].

While the structure of the forum seems quite complex and clear cut, it needs to be noted that discussion threads are not as neatly categorised on the forum. Thus, when a new topic of discussion emerges, the thread seems to get created mainly in the 'General Matters' category (which could explain its significant size). Hence, this sub-section includes numerous messages on a great variety of topics.

In relation to the patterns of posting, it can be easily observed that while some discussion threads get no (or at best a few) responses, others stimulate a good number of posts. On the other hand while some of the discussions may become 'abandoned' (as no users will make any posts in the thread for months and even years), these threads may be reopened triggered by certain new events. It is also important to note that while some topics are 'kept alive' by the users through continuous posting, others are maintained on top by forum administrators and moderators by making them 'sticky' (i.e. sticking them on top of the other threads which are chronologically sorted).

Forum statistics indicate that currently there are 883 members registered on the forum, but as the information can be accessed even without registration, it emerges that the 'readership' of the forum may be even higher. Of this total number of registered users, about 100 members are also categorised as active.

There is insufficient information emerging from the forum in relation to the profile of the forum users (i.e. their gender, age, occupation etc.). However, their demographic characteristics are in most cases revealed through their posts on the forum. Thus, by parsing through all messages on the forum, several general insights could be drawn: the forum tends to be populated mainly by a male audience and their age seems to reflect the Census (2006) profile of the Romanian community in Ireland (with most people found in the 25 to 44 age bracket).

While most of the forum users live in Ireland, there are also those that visit the forum from their locations in Romania (mostly in search of information about their imminent trip to Ireland) or from other countries such as Italy, Spain, UK etc.) Amongst those that connect to the forum from Ireland, a great majority seem to live in Dublin, thus in accordance with the findings of the Census (2006).

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[32] As of December 6th 2011

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Besides these demographic characteristics that build the profile of the forum users, there are also multiple instances on the forum when its members talk about themselves in a collective manner, by evaluating their identity in opposition with their 'offline' counterparts or with other online communities. On these occasions, it became evident that forum participants perceive themselves as elite: a group of well-behaved, intelligent, informed and well-educated people. Furthermore they are the ones that have succeeded in their goals and are 'still there' [i.e. on the forum and in Ireland] when recession has hit the country. According to the exact words of one of the forum users, they see themselves as the 'upper class' among Romanians in Ireland.

It is interesting to note that some users perceive the forum as a close-knit community, or even a family. This may come as a surprise given the lack of profile information that they offer when registering on the website and also the fact that there are no group meetings of forum members outside the 'borders' of the online. In reality, the high degree of familiarity between members can be explained by the long time they have spent together on the forum which has allowed them to get to know each other gradually, just like in everyday life. Moreover, forum users tend to meet each other offline, however this happens only in very small groups and at the family level.

In conclusion, even though the forum may not be statistically representative of all Romanians in Ireland, it was chosen as the main platform for this study for several very important reasons. The first aspect refers to the particularities of the public sphere (or better said the public sphericule) of Romanians in Ireland. As it was already pointed out in the previous chapters, identities need to be constructed in the public sphere in order to acquire their legitimacy and recognition. Thus, my search for the Romanian public sphere has led me to this forum, a medium through which Romanians in Ireland widely discuss their collective identities.

Chapter 5 – Methodology

Several authors have argued that the concept of identity is far too complex, underdeveloped and little understood in contemporary social sciences. Abdelal et al. (2006) for example note that in spite of the existing efforts to measure identity, these attempts have been "either too hard and simplistic (relying on blunt survey instruments or census data, for example) or too soft and impressionistic (such as relying on the individual scholar's account of identity narratives) (p.696).

Thus, from a methodological point of view the study of identity raises a number of challenges. One aspect refers to the reliability of the concept in social research. According to Morley & Robins (1995), what gives identity stability is exactly the process of negotiation mainly because

> [the] cohesion of collective identity must be sustained *through time,* through a collective memory, through lived and shared traditions, through the sense of a common past and heritage. It must also be maintained *across space,* through a complex mapping of territories and frontiers, principles of inclusion and exclusion that define 'us' against 'them'. (p.72)

Abdelal et al. (2006) also discuss the reliability of the concept in social science research and argue that even if identities are not static realities (but rather dynamic processes), there are periods and contexts when identities are stable enough to be grasped and analysed.

The implications of these aspects for the methodologies of identity studies are significant. It is implied that in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of identity and its dynamic character, it is necessary to engage in a long-term observation of a particular group or community. Moreover, it emerges that capturing the various expressions of their identity in relation to the multiple identification markers (in the form of 'us vs. them' dichotomies) is essential. Last but not least, the context of a particular identity narrative is key in interpreting the various research findings.

The next sections of this chapter aim to provide an overview of the available methodological choices presented by previous studies of mediated diasporic identity narratives, and also to explain the rationale for choosing the particular methodological approach with which this study engages.

Qualitative vs. quantitative

Existing scholarship on ethnic or diasporic identities has been marked by both qualitative and quantitative approaches to the topic. For example, quantitative approaches to identity are often used in surveys, including the Census. Each Census questionnaire contains a range of questions that prompt respondents to state their various identities (ethnic, national religious, etc.). While these approaches tend to adopt an apparently superficial measure of identity (i.e. identity measured in terms of the adherence to particular 'labels'), these surveys are nevertheless extremely useful as they give a broad view of people's formal (and declarative) belongings.

However, an increased awareness towards the more complex implications of migration and diversity on societies and on migrant and diasporic groups themselves has rendered recent methodologies more sensitive to qualitative aspects.

In migration studies, qualitative methodologies have always been favoured due to numerous sampling difficulties. As Iosifides (2003) points out residential fluidity and even illegality of some of the participants has led more and more researchers to adopt fairly flexible selection procedures and more qualitative approaches.

Traditionally, qualitative studies were accused of impeding the generalisation of results. This argument is somewhat overrated in today's research context. On the one hand many strands of migration studies are still in an exploratory phase and this implies the need to employ a qualitative methodology in order to draw valuable insights and to achieve a rich in-depth understanding of that particular aspect.

On the other hand, it is inaccurate to assume that quantitative studies results can always be generalised to the wider population. Migrants or diasporas cannot be fully targeted in surveys based on statistical random sampling. Thus, by appealing to other sampling methods such as the snow-ball technique or convenience sampling, the generalisability of data is also affected.

In the field of media studies, while there is an increased recognition of the value of qualitative methodologies in understanding audiences, Aksoy and Robins (2003) point out a further need for such research on audiences in order to understand in depth issues such as:

[...] what people actually say about their use of media: in what ways do they talk about what and how they watch, read or listen? How do they negotiate their positions with respect to the media that are presently available to them? What are their expectations, and where, with respect to those expectations, do they experience frustrations or limitations in the actually existing media environment?' (p.366);

Taking into consideration all arguments stated above, it appears that a study of the relation between media and diasporic identities can confidently be approached from a qualitative perspective. Identity construction and belonging are dynamic processes that can hardly be quantified and measured through a quantitative approach without the risk of over-simplifying the two concepts.

Location, location, location... Choosing a fieldwork site

Generally speaking, the decision over the location of fieldwork research occupies a secondary position in relation to the choice of a particular methodology and research method. However, in the present case, the choice of a site for empirical study impacts significantly upon the range of research methodologies to be employed, therefore these aspects need to be discussed beforehand.

Many studies of diasporic identities focus on the traditional face-to-face interactions between migrants, ethnics, and members of diasporas. For example Bacon's research (1999) centres on Asian Indians in Chicago and the role of micro-level social interactions in the construction and maintenance of their collective ethnic identity. There is also Dudley's work (2002) on the possible relationships between the identity of Kareni Refugees from Burma camp, and the global flows of objects, information and images. The more recent studies of Popov (2010) and Andits (2010) also focus on the construction of diasporic identities particularly in relation to the homeland from the perspective of the returned Soviet Greek migrants and, respectively, the Hungarian diaspora.

Valuable insights also emerge from studies of the role of various media in the construction of diasporic identities, such as the work of Tsagarousianou (2001) on the South Asian and Greek Cypriot communities in London, Madianou's research (2005) on the Turkish community in Athens and Sreberny's study (2000) of Iranians in London.

With increasing de-territorialisation and hybridisation of cultures, studies of the impact of new media and in particular the internet on various aspects in

the lives of ethnics and diasporas (Nedelcu, 2000, 2008; Hepp, 2004; Hiller and Franz, 2004) and especially the articulations of diasporic identities (Mandaville, 2001; Sökefeld, 2002; Srinivasan, 2006; Chan, 2005, Parker and Song, 2006; Elias et al., 2007) tend to come to the forefront.

Referring to the case of ethnographic identity studies, Dayan (1998) points out that

> "When the cultural identity of an increasing number of such groups tends to become dissociated from any direct territorial inscription, one can expect ethnographers to shift their attention away from their traditional objects (spatially circumscribed communities) and to start studying those communication devices that maintain dispersed groups alive by linking peripheries to centers and connecting presents to pasts (p.111)

What Dayan clearly indicates is that researchers, and in particular ethnographers, should not avoid approaching new media and the internet as potential locations where identity 'happens' and becomes unravelled through discourses. However there is still a significant debate in relation to the online-offline approaches to identity, both at theoretical as well as methodological level. On the one side it is argued that 'the online' does not create the premises for the formation or articulation of any significant identity discourse. Moreover, it is argued that identities online tend to suffer from some kind of volatility, thus rendering them as transient phenomena.

Similarly, the online is also deemed to bear negative (even perilous) consequences for the methodological framework of the research. Lack of certitude over who's who online, as well as the difficulties encountered from a research ethics' perspective constituted important aspects that have deterred many scholars from engaging with 'the online'. Kozinets (2010) suggests that it is impossible to ignore new media and the internet precisely because our social worlds are increasingly going digital.

As Hine (2008) suggests, the need to study online social life in its own right was, in part, a reaction against the 'deficit models', which stressed the impoverishment of online interactions as compared to those in face-to-face settings" (p.259). Thus, several researchers oriented themselves to the web in order to counter the dismissal of 'the online' by traditional methodologies.

The criticism of web interactions and the virtual world have almost invariably focused on issues of identity play. Authenticity online (i.e. the certitude that you are who you say you are) has come into question numerous times. However, as more and more researchers acknowledge, it appears that virtual

interactions are not necessarily 'unreal' and not so different from the face-to-face interactions (Hine, 2008).

While the virtual world is nevertheless important in today's societies, this does not imply that online social research will simply replace face-to-face research. However, as Kozinets (2010) asserts, when particular phenomena appear solely online or when the lives of certain communities only acquire a virtual dimension, it is absolutely acceptable for research methodologies to focus exclusively on the online aspects and manifestations.

The internet is also credited for allowing easy collection and storing of data (Gruber, 2008; Lee et al., 2008). In a similar line, Kozinets (2010) argues that the net leaves traces that can be recorded and used for research purposes in a way that no other method could.

However, the choice between the online and the offline does not refer simply to methodological practicalities (e.g. financial costs, accessibility, and the amount of effort involved). The decision is thus informed by the specificities and manifestations of the phenomena to be studied.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the search for the public sphere (or sphericule) where Romanians in Ireland articulate their identities has led me to their forum, an online stage where media messages are constructed and debated. In the absence of any other significant platforms that may act as public sphere (e.g. other types of diasporic media or physical meeting places), the web has constituted for Romanians in Ireland an important aspect in their diasporic lives. Several questions emerge at this stage in relation to the methodological implications of this selection.

Facing up to the manifold methodological choices

Abdelal et al. (2006) find that the study of identity tends to be characterised by methodological eclecticism: interviews and focus groups, discourse analysis, content analysis, experiments, agent-based modelling, cognitive mapping and surveys have been used in the rich body of scholarship on the topic.

A brief look at the studies of identity and migration indicates that the great majority of these studies have favoured the interview method in order to gather data about migrants' feelings of belonging. Interviews can be ideal research methods for topics as intricate as the study of identity. This allows us to

reach a deeper understanding of the meanings that people assign to their everyday experiences which contribute to the shaping of their identity. However the main weakness of the interview from this point of view is that it does not allow for identities to be studied in interaction. The missing link between the individual narrative and the collective discourse rarely emerges from a methodology based entirely on the interview.

Focus group research corrects this to a certain extent as it allows people (and their narratives) to interact during the discussion. However what the focus group in this situation aims to achieve is to create a small-scale and temporary public sphere. Hence, due to the limited number of participants in the focus group the relevance of these interactions for the true contestation and negotiation of meaning in the real world comes under question. This prompts several authors to note that both interviews and focus groups attempt to isolate variables by examining behaviour in one artificial setting (Machin, 2002, p.6).

Some of the above-mentioned challenges could be addressed by engaging in an ethnographic study. Many authors see ethnographic studies as an in-depth involvement in particular communities, almost like a total immersion in their daily lives. Thus, participant observation has often been used by ethnographers and, used over a long period of time, this type of knowledge produced a very detailed account of the communities studied. However, according to Machin (2002), when re-assembling this data we need to be very sensitive about the context (and in particular the cultural context in which this is produced).

Ang (1990) notes an increasing use of ethnographic approaches to the study of media audiences. This is mainly because, according to Gillespie (2000) "ethnographic studies contribute to a rich understanding of what people actually do with the media, rather than the predictable 'findings' about what the media do to people" (p.170).

Ethnography has been praised and equally criticised for employing a relatively open-ended approach. According to Machin (2002), the greatest advantage however is that ethnography in theory allows for the social world to be studied as it is, in its natural state, and not in artificial settings or through researchers' selection and isolation of variables that they feel are important (p.6).

From its origins in nineteenth-century Western anthropology when the term was associated with the study of 'the distant', a descriptive account of a community or culture (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, Obenhuber and

Krzyzanowski, 2008), ethnographic research has been increasingly applied to contemporary communities of societies and there is generally a lot of flexibility surrounding the definition of what this method entails.

Several authors have discussed the importance of ethnographies online and it is worth mentioning here the valuable contributions of Hine (2000), but also Kozinets (2010). Hine (2000) recognises the importance of online ethnography (which she calls 'virtual ethnographies'), but she highlights the fact that the online is not necessarily a 'stand-alone' sphere of life and that these methodologies tend to be only partial in relation to face-to-face ethnographies (Hine, 2000).

Kozinets (2010) also discusses online ethnographies and views netnography ("a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today's social worlds" (p.1)) to open-ended, flexible, easy to link with other methods and, furthermore, it has the potential to be conducted in a manner that is entirely unobtrusive (p.56). Shifting significantly from Hine's (2000) position, he asserts that the internet may come to the forefront if the online component of a community or its online manifestations are more significant than the offline ones.

There is often little consideration for the differences between online and offline ethnographic research. To a great extent these discussions overlap with the conundrum of studying 'virtual' vs. 'real' communities, online vs. offline identities. Christine Hine aims to address some of these issues. Firstly, she argues that one of the key distinctions between 'traditional' and 'virtual' ethnography refers to the very definition of community: are virtual communities indeed communities in their own right particularly since users are able to log out whenever they choose? In response to this question, Hine draws attention to the ground-breaking work of Rheinhold on online communities, who clearly demonstrates that such communities are very 'real' and also very meaningful for their members.

Secondly, Hine mentions that while for a 'traditional' ethnographer this type of research generally involves long term involvement with a particular community, in the case of online ethnographies this aspect is rather difficult to uncover. In other words, how could long-term involvement be 'quantified in an online research? Hine seems to argue however that even in the case of 'traditional' ethnographies, the researcher could not be involved in absolutely all aspects of the community's life. Thus, the ethnographer's notes could only capture snapshots in the life of that community rather than pay a holistic

attention to all practices as constitutive of a distinctive culture (p. 20). If anything, the online researcher is more fortunate due to the archival facilities that the internet allows.

Hine concludes that online ethnographies have so far contributed significantly to the changing relation between the ethnographer and participants as they no longer need to share the same time frame" (p. 23).Moreover, she argues that 'traditional' ethnographies have become a rarity today due to the manifold time and budget limitations.

In the current research context, the online ethnographic research is important due to the fact that, by focusing on the forum (and thus having access to archived information of more than six years of conversations), the dynamic aspect of identity becomes also highlighted and the role of various voices in the construction of identity is pointed out.

Several techniques for analysing the content of the messages posted on the forum have been explored. Content analysis generally refers to a set of procedures used to make inferences from the text about the sender, message, audience (Weber, 1990). This particular approach can be employed as a qualitative or a quantitative method. As a quantitative methodology, content analysis refers to a 'breaking' of the text into several units so that specific words that were used could be counted and the amount of coverage could be calculated (Philo, 2007, p.102).

As a quantitative method, content analysis was criticised particularly for its use of researcher-constructed, pre-set categories which were used to assess a particular text. Thus, one of the main challenges with this particular method is that it fails to take into the account the ambiguity of word meanings or category definitions. According to Downing and Husband (2005), content analysis tends to disregard the multiple ways in which language is used (irony, sarcasm etc.), therefore categories pre-assigned by researchers assume that language is always lucid and operates on a single level. The authors also point out that content analysis raises numerous issues in relation to sampling the units, as by randomly sampling, the narrative dimension of the text will be overlooked (Downing and Husband, 2005).

In a similar vein, Gunter (2000) suggests that content analysis assumes textual meanings are fixed and quantifiable. This aspect prompts Philo (2007) to note that, from an audience research perspective, a much more sophisticated analysis is required in order to understand how meanings are established and how audiences receive and interpret them (p.102).

From the perspective of this study, while a quantitative approach could bring a major advantage in that it could provide a strategy to make sense (in a time-efficient manner) of the huge amount of information archived on the forum website, several difficulties also emerge. Firstly, the style in which the text is written on the forum creates numerous problems: the spelling or typing mistakes, the level of informality in addressing other users as well as the deeply embedded irony and sarcasm of many posts all constitute important aspects which render quantitative content analysis as inappropriate in this case. Moreover, the language of the text also poses some difficulties as many software packages for content analysis do not support the Romanian language.

The qualitative approach to content analysis attempts to correct some of the problematic aspects inherent in a quantitative approach, by emphasising the capacity of texts to convey multiple meanings to the receiver. (Gunter, 2000, p.82). Hijmans (1996 cited in Gunter, 2000) distinguishes between several types of qualitative content analysis, among which he mentions structuralist-semiotic analysis, discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis and interpretative analysis.

The structuralist-semiotic type of content analysis aims, according to Gunter (2000) to discover the latent meanings of the media message. Thus, the analysis can have a layered character as the message is first analysed into narrative elements and subsequently searched for deeper meanings (p.86). This form of content analysis addresses to a great extent the main weakness of quantitative content analysis as it goes beyond the quantification of the text's surface manifest meanings; however, according to Gunter (2000) this type of approach has not been properly detailed and documented by any of the researchers employing this methodological approach.

Discourse analysis (DA) refers to the analysis of text and language in use (Barker and Galasinski, 2001; Abdelal et al. 2006; Smith and Bell, 2007). According to Smith and Bell (2007), DA should not be understood as a single research method, but rather as a range of mainly qualitative approaches which study the discourse in its socio-cultural context.

The power relations in a particular discourse are the subject of a dedicated strand of research, namely critical discourse analysis (CDA), which focuses on the analysis of both the opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language (Wodak, 2001 in Smith and Bell, 2007, p.80).

Both discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis have been frequently employed in the study of identity narratives and discourses (e.g. gender, sexual identities etc.), however only occasionally in relation to immigrants or diasporic identities (Clary-Lemon, 2010). Media discourses of racism and xenophobia have also been analysed through DA and CDA research methods. However, along with many other scholars, Barker and Galasinski (2001) assert that the main strength of these methods also constitutes its much criticised weakness, i.e. interpretations emerging from the analysis of the discourse tend to be open, dynamic and subject to change, thus raising multiple questions about the reliability and the validity of one's research findings.

In relation to rhetorical analysis, Gunter (2000) points out that this type of content analysis is centred around the question of how the message is presented visually or textually. Therefore, he describes it as a kind of stylistic analysis, which focuses at the same time on both the organization of a message and the choices made by the communicator.

Narrative analysis, a tradition in literary studies, has raised increasing interest in the social sciences "and has been applied in research projects that utilize stories to understand personal experience" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009, p.vii). The authors assert that these narratives are not however to be reduced to transcripts as we need to see the way they emplot, thematize and construct what they are about (p.xv). Therefore reality lies both in the story but also in the storytelling. In their view, narrative analysis needs to pay close attention to several important aspects such as linkages between different elements of the narrative. Meaning is not always self-evident, but it rather needs to be assembled from various circumstances; patterns of composition and contrasting themes; roles, purposes, and emphases which audiences confer on the stories; collaboration of various producers in the creation of the narrative; and last but not least the issues of control, i.e. which stories get told and which don't. Several other characteristics of the participants also become important, such as closeness of relationships between them, their status, jobs and the local culture.

Interpretative content analysis is often employed by researchers engaging with more descriptive research questions aiming at the discovery and formation of theory. According to Gunter (2000, p.91) the relation between data and concepts is in this circumstance fundamentally open: concepts serve to arrange data and to understand them in a substantially new way, while engaging with data also informs the construction of the concepts.

Thus, content analysis offers several methods for analysing collected data, yet each of these alternatives needs to be assessed against the aims of the current study.

Due to the fact that I am analysing information emerging from the forum's great variety (possibly hundreds) of distinct voices, one cannot speak of a structured, coherent single discourse that can be deconstructed in the search for manifest and latent meanings. Therefore, in spite of their tremendous utility for the social sciences, both DA and CDA seem inapplicable for this study. However, the concept of 'discourse' is nevertheless useful in the context of this research. In spite of the extensive use of DA and CDA in the social sciences, there has been little clarification in relation to the meaning of the term 'discourse'. This aspect is also confirmed by Mills (1997), who states the concept of 'discourse' "has perhaps the widest range of possible significations of any term in literary and cultural theory, and yet it is often the […] least defined" (:1). She also points out that there are multiple differences between theorists in the way they define discourse. For example, some define it in terms of the organisation of a particular text and the occurrence of particular utterances in the text, while others, such as the cultural theorists and the advocates of critical theory, focus on the power relations embedded in a discourse.

Neither the forum messages posted under the same topic nor the sum of all postings published by a user on the RCI forum can be considered by default as 'discourse', since they do not have the linguistic structural features that ensure its coherence and cohesion (Blommaert, 2005). However, when aggregated at the collective level, these postings become pieces of a puzzle that contours one (or several) Romanian diasporic identity discourses. From this perspective, discourse is understood more as a (collective) voice (Bakhtin, 1981; Mills, 1997), thus implying a broader understanding of 'discourse', which departs from the exclusive linguistic focus and instead subsumes all similar utterances which add to a particular view over a certain topic.

Moreover, while acknowledging the importance of power relations embedded in these discourses, they are only highlighted in the present analysis when they become relevant for the diasporic identity discourses.

Reverting back to the assessment of methods to be used for the analysis of data, it emerges that rhetoric and narrative analysis also seem unsuitable for my purposes, mainly because the level of informality of the forum discussion. The 'informal talk' thus renders the concerns over the organisation of the text and the structure of the story as rather minor arguments. However the concept

of 'narrative' remains important for the analysis as, according to Somers (1994), "it is through narrative that we make sense of the social world and how we constitute our social identities" (p.606). Thus, the narrative becomes more than an organised story, but rather as ways of integrating our life experiences.

Given the dearth of previous research on the topic of Romanians' engagement with media in the process of collectively shaping their identities, the present study adopted an exploratory perspective, which will benefit significantly from an interpretative analysis of the text content. This type of approach allows for a reflexive relation to be developed between the operationalisation of the main concepts on the one hand and data collection process and analysis on the other.

However it is important to note that forum data cannot simply be conceived of as plain text. Besides its rich archived content, the forum also represents a community with its own culture and norms, a community of members that are interacting on a daily basis, exchanging messages and negotiating meanings. Hence, an immersion into the collective identity discourses constructed on a diasporic forum requires a methodological frame that is sensitive to such intricate aspects which often go beyond the textual level. For this particular purpose, ethnographic research seemed to comply with these goals.

In conclusion, summing up all the above arguments and in accordance with the stated purposes of this research, this study will adopt an ethnographic methodology which allows identity to be studied in its 'natural' context just like it emerges in everyday life. Under the ethnographic methodological frame, several research methods appear as particularly important and have been employed for the study of this topic: the qualitative assessment of the content and the participant observation of the forum interactions.

Ethical aspects

One of the most important aspects that emerges when studying 'your own' relates to the insider-outsider dilemma. The 'dangers' of engaging with research on people with a similar background (or which are part of the same group) is, according to Turnbull (2000 cited in Ryan, 2007) mainly related to a sort of superficiality, i.e. skimming over things which we all assume to be shared and which are taken for granted'.

However in relation to my own position in this research process it needs to be stated that while I am clearly a cultural insider (I too am a Romanian migrant in Ireland), this aspect has also been key to decoding part of the cultural context which might otherwise lie hidden.

Moreover, it also needs to be noted that while I am a cultural insider based on my nationality and ethnicity, not the same can be said about my belonging to the forum community. Before starting out on my PhD research journey I was not a member of the forum. Therefore, in this respect I was still 'an outsider' just like almost all ethnographers at the onset of their fieldwork research.

This mix of being both an insider and an outsider brings multiple advantages as it allows me to be at the same time sensitive to the hidden meanings in their discourse and to the cultural context from which their discourses originate, while at the same time keeping a certain distance between myself and the members of the group, a particular detachment which has allowed me to maintain the neutral attitude which a researcher is supposed to hold.

The Internet has often been considered the perfect research environment because it allows the researcher a privileged position, i.e. according to Paccagnella (1997) "to become a *lurker*, an unseen, silent witness to the meetings of the community" (cited in Senjkovic and Dukic, 2005, p.46). He feels that lurking tends to "reduce the deformation of the veracity" produced by the researcher's presence during face-to-face interaction (ibid.).

There are several ethical implications for studying the internet. Many authors have asked themselves the question of whether the internet is a public or rather a private space. Some seem to argue that since the internet sites are free to read (thus not requiring a username or password in order to log in) then we can safely regard their content as a public domain (Parker and Song, 2006, p.183).

Other authors however insist on the need to ensure anonymity of the online subjects and to obtain the informed consent prior to engaging with the data in our research (Hine, 2001). Several scholars however assert that this is difficult and not always possible online (Eynon et al. 2008) mainly because it is difficult to assess whether online users have actually understood the context of the research.

Thus, while the presence of the ethnographer needs to be accepted by those who inhabit the setting (Hine, 2008, p.259), many questions still emerge in

relation to gaining the consent of the members; who owns the data; how do we handle the information; vulnerability (due to exposing their opinions)? (Kozinets, 2010).

Eynon et al. (2008) argues that online research is, from an ethical perspective, not that much different from offline research in that a balance always needs to be achieved "between the potential and significance of harm to the participants and the benefits of the research to the individual and society more generally" (p.27).

In conclusion, scholars generally do not agree on common ethical guidelines. Thus while some ask for explicit permission beforehand, others collect the information without asking/obtaining permission (but keeping the identities of the users anonymous). According to Paccagnella (1997) there are also scholars who simply do not declare explicitly whether permission was obtained for their logs or not (p.7).

In relation to the present study, it needs to be noted that I consider that the researcher's greatest responsibility is to ensure that the anonymity of the forum users is always protected. For this particular reason, their names or forum usernames have never been used in the thesis or any other research report.

The issue of obtaining the informed consent from the forum users was deemed as unattainable in this particular situation. This is purely because, by accessing information from the last six years, many of the forum users whose posts I have read no longer contribute to the forum. Thus, I have opted for informing the forum owner and administrator about my intentions to study the group. Only following his permission to access forum data did I engage in any form of data collection and analysis.

It is also worth adding that, due to the significant number of posts on the forum as well as the fact that the language of posts is Romanian (which requires their translation into English when used in any publication), it means that the chances of recognising users are slim.

Accessing the 'backstage': an insight into the mechanics of the research process

As I had not been a regular member of this online community previous to the commencement of the current research, the first step into the fieldwork constituted an effort to get accustomed to the forum, its look, the topics

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discussed, and, last but not least, the 'actors' of the forum. Thus, I started by mapping out the main topics which were debated. This first attempt to immerse in the world of the posts and the posters on romaniancommunity.net was crucial in helping me decide over a framework for 'measuring' identity and also over a sampling procedure for the numerous posts in the forum archives.

While the extensive literature review had strongly informed the operationalisation of identity, empirical data also impacted on the dimensions of identity which were selected for the analysis. For example, following the pilot stage, after becoming familiarised with the forum, I created a mind map of all emerging dimensions of identity which was subsequently used upon the second reading of the forum messages for categorising all posts. The key findings, the relevant comments and observations as well as some useful citations were noted in a separate document which was subsequently used when analysing the findings.

Many difficulties emerged in relation to the sampling used in processing the information from the forum messages. First of all, on a discussion forum where some members are 'old acquaintances' sharing a common 'online history' together, it became clear that most of their answers and attitudes were influenced by past events on the forum which they would only briefly make reference to when posting a new message.

The second main concern with regards to sampling was related to the patterns of conversations taking place of the forum: even thread titles which appeared as mostly unrelated with the idea of identity/ identification contained valuable insights for the analysis. This is particularly important as it bears close resemblance to the way identity unfolds itself in all activities of everyday life.

Hence, it emerged that the best solution was to include all messages in the analysis. Thus, data presented in this thesis runs over a period of more than six years (2004-2010), totalling a number of 2,227 discussion threads and 25,151 posts[33]. This is particularly useful for the analysis as it includes many key moments in the life of the Romanian community in Ireland (RCI), such as Romanians becoming EU citizens (January 1st 2007) etc. and the implications that these contexts have had on the pattern of settlement, integration and identity strategies.

A final point of note relates to the procedure used for the analysis of this array of qualitative data. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, the use of

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[33] Counted on May 31st 2010.

software packages for qualitative analysis could not be applied in this particular case due to the significant amount of information, the language of the posts and, last but not least, the informal style of addressing on the forum.

Conclusions

This study aims to add to the existing body of research on the topic of media and identity. It also strives to enrich existing scholarship by innovatively making use of the internet (in particular of the forum's multiple attributes) in the study of diasporic identities.

Traditionally the internet was used in research as an alternative to other media as it was favoured mainly for its novelty and the rapid adoption speed by ethnic minorities and diasporas. The web was also praised for its methodological usefulness. Studying online communities allows researchers to grasp the meaning of diasporas beyond the physical borders of either the home- or the host-land.

Moreover, the forum analysis makes available to the researchers a rich database of messages and posts covering a long period of time and this allows us to see the process of identity formation 'as a movie', rather than as a series of isolated snapshots.

Understanding the identity discourse(s) of a community as a collective and continuous process of negotiation and re-negotiation requires a long-term immersion into the life of that particular community. Thus, ethnographic research seems thus to fit best with the objectives of this research mainly due to the fact that it allows the researcher to grasp the complete picture of a particular community and to understand the meanings which the community associates with their social world (Bryman, 2001).

In the case of the Romanian communities abroad there is a dearth of studies in relation to their narratives of identity and their media use. Hence, this research is mainly exploratory and thus, it avoids positing *a priori* a strong causal relation between media consumption and identities. By adopting a qualitative research methodology, I aim to understand the identity narratives of the Romanian migrants in Ireland and also to comprehend the process through which these identities are constructed, in particular in relation to media.

Various studies have shown that online space plays a key role for diasporas. In particular for the Romanian community in Ireland, the internet and

essentially the online discussion forum of the Romanian Community in Ireland (RCI) constitutes the centrepiece of community life. The forum is a rich source of information about Romanians as a community, the ways in which they see themselves and others. It allows access to information over a long time-span (2004-2010), thus including many key moments in the life of the community.

Adopting Christine Hine's concept of 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2001), this is a study of how users of an online discussion forum experience this technology and make use of it to articulate and negotiate their identities. Participant observation and content analysis have been used to examine the messages posted on the forum and their meaning in relation to the topic studied.

The research process was structured in several stages which have allowed me to work efficiently with the significant quantity of text data involved. Thus, following the literature review process I have engaged with the forum data in order to evaluate it against the theoretical frame. This first encounter with data enabled me to establish several broad categories (and sub-categories) which were later used to organise and code the text.

In relation to the analysis of data, I have adopted an interpretative content-analysis methodological perspective which involved a constant reflexivity between the theoretical frame and the research findings. Thus, following the selection of all relevant information from the forum archives and organising the information into relevant categories, the writing of the findings began, following closely the structure of pre-established categories and sub-categories.

The analysis thus presents an overall image of the topics studied as it was shaped by all forum posts. The analysis was however sensitive to important aspects and contexts (such as the gender and social class aspects, or the chronological moment when a particular discussion took place). Where relevant, the relation between various posts was also highlighted.

Moreover, it is worth adding that while the findings obtained from this study of online Romanians cannot be routinely generalised to the entire Romanian community in Ireland several interesting insights emerge and these could constitute possible hypotheses in a future study that might encompass both the online as well as the offline articulations of identity.

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Part 3 Data analysis

Chapter 6 – Mediated identities: Online Romanians' engagement with media

Overview of the chapter

This chapter focuses on the links which Romanians on the internet develop with media in the wider sense. By compiling the information available from all discussion threads, a clear image of the media sources used by the forum members emerges. Besides mapping the media diet of the forum users, this chapter also highlights the main arguments and opinions which Romanians online hold about media that they consume. The main roles of the particular types of media consumed by forum users will also be revealed.

Following on, the chapter provides an empirical account of the way forum members' interpretations of the media messages that they consume (in particular in relation to the representations of Romanians and their country in the media). How they comment on the coverage of these topics in media (from homeland, their country of destination and even diasporic media) and how they explain and aim to address the negative portrayals will be discussed in this chapter. The impact that such media messages have on their collective identifications will also be highlighted.

The next section of the chapter points out the specificities of the use of the internet by Romanians in Ireland. The discussion will be centred around the role played by the virtual space and in particular by the forum for the Romanian community in Ireland in the process of articulation of diasporic narratives of identity.

6.1 'Personalised' media diets: What? Why? and How? - Forum members' engagement with media content

A complete picture of media consumption patterns of all Romanians in Ireland cannot be constructed solely from information available on the forum mainly because no generalisations could routinely be made based exclusively on the confessions of online Romanians. However, interesting insights have emerged while looking closely at the forum discussions and at the 'media talk' which takes place online.

Forum participants seem to use a great variety of media, both in terms of sources (media from homeland, Irish and foreign media) and also in relation to the medium (video, radio, written press, etc.). The role of media-sourced content on the forum is incommensurate. Many discussion threads have emerged as a reaction to news which are brought to the attention of the other users. This is particularly the case with news about the political and economic crises; news about Romanians which make the headlines in Irish, British or other foreign media; news about updates to the immigration legislation, etc.

On countless occasions, forum members mentioned accessing a wide range of media 'from home' and this includes national and local newspapers, TV channels, online news portals, and weekly magazines. Much of this content is consumed online because Romanian newspapers and magazines have no established networks of distribution in Ireland.

Even the televised content produced in Romania is sometimes accessed through the internet (sometimes in breach of copyright issues). Thus while there are TV channels which offer free access to their shows by means of their websites, there are also several internet sites which offer (also for free but illegally) captures of satellite transmissions of all Romanian (and some foreign) television channels. The quality of this online streaming can at times be quite low, therefore offering no guarantee that a favourite show could be watched without interruptions. While many Romanians however opt for installing a satellite dish, there are instances when this is not achievable due to the location and positioning of the house (which raises numerous problems for the quality of the satellite signal received) as well as the rules imposed by landlords or Irish management companies on residents.

Besides accessibility, the use of media from home in breach of copyright issues can also be linked to their perceptions of homeland media. Thus, as one

user argues, some things are not worth being paid for if they can be achieved for free (2009 – M31).

Taking these aspects into consideration, it emerges that for many Romanians in Ireland the web represents the only access gateway to media content (written, audio or visual) from home.

Homeland media are consumed by the forum users mainly in order to keep in contact with what happens in the homeland (politically, economically, socially and culturally)[34] and also to keep an eye on what takes place in other Romanian diasporas. Several Romanian newspapers have entire sections dedicated to news from/about Romanian diasporic communities. In addition, almost all TV and radio stations occasionally discuss in their shows issues pertaining to Romanian migrants living abroad, including representations of Romanian migrants in different countries; discrimination and humiliations to which they are exposed; labour market restrictions for Romanian workers; level of remittances; cases of Romanians returning home due to the global economic crisis; language problems of the returned migrants and their kids; and, last but not least, the reactions of Romanian institutions and politicians to Romania's situation and image abroad.

A special interest is also manifested in relation to news about the gypsies. While in some instances this community is presented in the context of the country of origin, at other times news presents them as migrants in various Western countries.

Besides allowing Romanians abroad to keep in contact with the homeland realities, data also indicate that consumption of transnational media allows users to continually make comparisons between the home and the host society and evaluate any potential improvements in the situation back home. Hence, media content from home is acknowledged as playing an important role in the lives of migrants by allowing them to constantly update their plans for return. It thus becomes apparent that news and reportages from home play an important role in the dynamic construction of belonging as they contribute to the shaping and re-shaping of the image of the homeland in the eyes of its diaspora.

For several users the choice to consume homeland media needs to be seen as strongly linked to the desire to stay in touch with what happens in the

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[34] Among the topics that seem the most relevant for the forum members are: Romanian tourism and touristy places; business opportunities, the jobs market and the economic situation back home; Romanian politics; sport news; the quality of the educational system; Romanian property market and Irish investments in Romania; as well as interviews with Romanian cultural values and other personalities.

lives of those 'back home'. Without necessarily resorting to stereotypical explanations[35], it appears that this type of media use is specific to the female online members.

There are also forum members who prefer accessing media content that is related to the Romanian economic and political sphere as this allows them to maintain their involvement with home. By engaging in considerable efforts to keep up-to-date with as many points of view as possible in relation to the Romanian economic situation and its politics, these users become opinion leaders on the forum. They are able to juggle with a great variety of information, synthesise it and create correlations between various facts which would otherwise be inaccessible to the wider audience.

As expected, interest in homeland politics tends to be resurrected in electoral years. Some of the discussion threads with the greatest number of posts are precisely the ones discussing political matters around the time of elections. Thus, while the Romanian political sphere still seems to occupy an important role in the life of the forum members, it is only manifested sporadically and then put on hold before being resumed again for the next elections.

Mainly due to the fact that the image of the political sphere back home is, for the diaspora, a mediated image, media tend to play an important role in the decision to vote as well as the outcome of the Romanians' voting decisions. Media facilitate access to information due to the diminishing of the costs associated with installing a satellite dish, but also the wider availability and accessibility of the internet.

Very often forum members argue that Romanian media (indirectly) discourage them to vote as the images portrayed by the news from home convinced them that there was no 'real' choice and that all candidates (or political parties) were equally disappointing. Another important landmark is constituted by the 2009 Presidential elections when media were credited by many political leaders, opinion leaders and forum members alike to have significantly altered the result of the vote[36].

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[35] Such as the assumption that women are more communicative and sociable and therefore more involved in maintaining contacts with the family and friends back home.
[36] A short movie that was broadcasted by all TV channels showed one of the candidates, Traian Băsescu (who was the President in function at that time), allegedly hitting a boy that had mistaken his name during a political rally several years before. The broadcasting of the movie (which was perceived by most viewers as a fake) has in turn brought about a huge wave of sympathy and popularity for Băsescu who eventually won the elections. Following the elections the movie was proven to be a fake by the Secret Services who analysed the frames.
Media have also played a crucial role just hours before the end of the election time. Due to time zone differences, when elections in Romania concluded and the first count of the votes was underway, Băsescu's counter-candidate Mircea Geoană had appeared live on all TV channels

Romanian media also allow forum members to feel a sort of continuity with their lives from the past. As one user mentions, during Christmas and the New Year he feels bound to access the typical Romanian televised variety shows with their specific humour and their traditional music. The user also sees the consumption of this type of media as the perfect accompaniment to traditional Romanian food and this places the role of media as providers of a content to be consumed, just like any other traditional goods from home (such as ethnic food etc.).

A surprising element is the fact that many of the long-term migrants mention that Romanian media are not worth watching, while many of the new migrants express a strong desire to access media from home in the new context. This trend seems to go against the established beliefs that older generation migrants tend to be more nostalgic and want to access media from home. While nostalgia is indeed noticed in some of the forum discussion, settled migrants seem be more selective in the media that they consume (by engaging with a mix of media sources). At the same time, for newcomers there may be a tendency to stick to the 'old' ways and, for a while, to ritualistically engage with media from home.

Irish media are also extensively mentioned by users of the forum. Almost all newspapers, radio and TV channels (in addition to several local newspapers, online news portals, weekly or monthly magazines) have been cited (countless times) in forum discussions and the meanings of these have been analysed and negotiated by Romanians in their online space. The topics that seem to be of most interest are: the current state of the Irish economy and the country's political affairs (budget cuts, earnings, recession and prices, housing market, elections etc.); updates to the immigration legislation (i.e. change in work permit regulations[37]); public and political position towards Bulgaria's and Romania's membership; citizenship information and requirements; news and feature reports about (Romanian) migrants and Irish attitudes towards migration; crimes/deaths involving Romanians and crimes involving gypsies as perpetrators; and, last but not least, they show an interest in local crimes, an indicator which is used by Romanians to test the value of certain residential neighbourhoods.

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proclaiming his victory on the basis of the preliminary vote count from electoral sections based in Romania. As a result, seeing that the 'wrong' candidate was about to win the elections, diaspora has quickly mobilised in the few hours left before the end of the election period abroad and they have overturned the results of the vote. This has given the current President the title of: 'Diaspora elected president'.

[37] Following January 2007 when they became EU citizens, many Romanians and Bulgarians are still required to have a valid work permit in order to work in Ireland.

Besides Romanian and Irish media, many other sources of information from foreign media[38] are also used. These media include a mix of TV channels and newspapers as well as news portals and professional media monitoring websites from around the world. The main topics from foreign media that have raised the interest of Romanians online are: migration regulations (in particular the British because they know that the Irish will follow the same pattern; the deeds of Romanians in the world; negative representations and insults; the rights of EU citizens and the available EU services for its citizens; the future of Romanians in the EU; and also hot topics of the moment such as the swine flu outbreak, the Islamic veil debates etc.

In addition to the typical media sources used, many other sources of information appear in the discourses of Romanians online: websites of several key institutions such as the government and ministries in both Romania and Ireland, trade unions websites, job search and advice websites (work permit, tax calculation, immigration), house search websites, internet sites that contain information about current legislation (Romanian and Irish), blogs and personal websites[39], services, statistics and reports, financial analysis[40], entertainment and music download web pages, IT news, other Romanian diasporic websites, web pages of other diasporic communities in Ireland (Moldova.ie), websites of some homeland cities, cultural and social events (Ireland and Romania), universities websites, news about ethnic minorities in Romania (divers.ro), religious calendars etc.

There are also mentions of diasporic media and it emerges that some of the forum participants read the Romanian newspaper edited in Ireland (*Informaţia IRL,* currently *Actualitatea IRL)* as well as diasporic communication produced by Romanians elsewhere[41].

As it emerges from these findings, the inventory of media sources indicated on the forum is indeed remarkable. Many forum users appear as very savvy media consumers that know exactly where to get each piece of

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[38] This refers mainly to media from the United Kingdom (BBC, The Times, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Guardian, Daily Mail, The Windsor Star, London Evening Standard, Financial Times, The Mirror, Belfast Telegraph, Sky New, Virgin TV), French (Le Figaro, Le Monde, Le Telegramme, PlusArte), Italian (Il Messagerao, www.ansa.it, Mediaset) German (Deutsche Welle, Die Presse), American (MSNBC, CNBC, NY times, The Daily Show, www.pbs.org), New Zealand (NZ herald), Swedish (dn.se), Russian (Pravda), Canadian (Edmonton Sun) European media sources (http://ec.europa.eu/, http://euobserver.com/) and many other sources (Bloomberg.com, Yahoo News, Reuters, Vanity Fair Magazine, afp.com, mail.com, National Geographic, History Channel, Travel and Living, Explore).
[39] E.g. www.davidmcwilliams.ie, brianmlucey.wordpress.com, http://www.andreeavass.ro/blog, Newsweek blog, ronanlyons.com, irelandafternama.wordpress.com, www.janinedalton.com/blog.
[40] E.g. nationmaster.com, finfacts.ie, ESRI.
[41] http://www.mareaunire.com/uk/; www.clickromania.co.uk; http://www.easteurope.org.uk/.

information. In many situations these media sources are used as arguments that illustrate their points of view in forum discussions or, alternatively, they may be used as sources of information and advice in response to questions asked on the forum.

While analysing empirical data, another interesting finding emerged in relation to the type of media used by Romanians on the forum. As the concept of hyphenated identities becomes more and more used in the social sciences to delineate the possibility of co-existence (rather than self-exclusion) of more alternative ethnic identities (e.g. Chinese-American, Indian-British etc.), a similar trend can be discovered in the field of media studies as some Romanians on the forum use 'hyphenated' media sources: English-language news websites which are produced and hosted in Romania (e.g. www.dailynews.ro), European news websites which have a Romanian emphasis (e.g. www.europeana.ro, BBC Romania etc.).

Findings presented so far seem to point to the fact that the use of such a varied array of media sources generally emphasises the diverse information needs of the forum users. Romanians online appear to be interested equally in Romanian and Irish affairs, but also international events. Moreover Romanian migrants on the forum seem to prefer using different sources of information in order to cross-check the same piece of news from more than one source.

Moreover, by accessing information from this diverse range of media sources, the forum users get a broader picture of the world political and economic sphere and this also allows them to take the pulse of the image of Romania and Romanians in the world. Thus they are able to make comparisons and draw conclusions about which countries tend to be more welcoming or, on the contrary, more discriminatory towards migrants in general (and, of course, towards Romanian migrants in particular).

In conclusion, if we insist on identifying a link between media consumption patterns and the level of integration (or alternatively segregation), this pastiche of media sources that Romanians online use, could only indicate a rather fluid and hybrid sense of diasporic identification, rather than suggesting a blind allegiance to either the homeland or the host society. We can thus conclude that the forum constitutes a platform where media contents from different sources are brought together and discussed while the meanings associated with these messages are collectively constructed.

Media talk

On many occasions forum members mentioned that they often compare the reporting of the same news from various sources. For example in the case of representations of Romanians abroad in homeland media, users tend to compare these reportages with the original ones published in the media of the host countries. This seems to be particularly the case of the highly educated and media versed members of the forum and it is mainly due to the fact that they have the language skills that allow them to consume media in languages other than Romanian.

Nevertheless, this trend also seems to point to a lack of trust in Romanian media. In relation to this, findings indicated that users appeal to a hierarchy of trustworthiness of Romanian media sources: thus, while some media outlets are recognised as serious and balanced, others are categorised as 'communist', biased and strongly lacking in quality. It is also worth noting that several users feel that all media (especially privately produced) are now lowering the standard of their content in order to become more appealing to a wider low-educated audience. The blame, according to some of the forum members, is however on the Romanian audience for not sanctioning this low standard.

Moreover it needs to be noted that in spite of consuming media from home, not all forum participants are content with its content or quality. Romanian media are blamed by forum users for their fixation on the same subjects which are perceived to be completely uninteresting. Media from home are also deemed as unsuitable for covering foreign news. Thus in many instances when Romanian media cover topics relating to Irish politics and economics, several users find it hard to believe that homeland media could have any competency in talking about these issues.

In relation to the type of news or material presented, forum members complain about the over-representation of negative news, especially related to pain, suffering and anger, criminality and tragic accidents, and failures of all kinds (government's, society's or individual's failures). There seems to be an agreement however between forum participants that this reflects a general tendency of media worldwide to focus on sensational issues.

Romanian entertainment media are also perceived to be of low quality due to an over-representation of sexual content and to their alleged focusing on gypsies but which are represented in a very superficial way (e.g. manele music

etc.). Thus, media from home get accused by forum participants of promoting "non-values" (i.e. people that are deemed as worthless) and of lacking respect for the invited (valuable) guests.

> [...] look at the Romanian channels how they throw garbage at one another instead of talking to each other; they bark instead of talking, they spit when they talk, they curse when they talk (2006 – M08)

Furthermore, several members of the forum point to the very limited choice of entertainment programmes (especially during Christmas and the New Year holidays) and this perceived lack of variety led some of the users to turn to foreign media[42].

There are also users who accuse Romanian media for uncritically adopting too many words from other languages (in particular English) thus transforming the Romanian language into a sort of 'Romglish' idiom.

Besides the issues related to content, forum members are also very critical of the quality of Romanian journalists. For example, one user breaks out when an article from homeland media has omitted a key word during translation, a word that made the difference between 'Romanians being the perpetrators of a particular crime' and 'Romanians being AMONG the perpetrators of the crime':

> […] these idiot journalists [they have not understood anything] and therefore they leave the readers to imagine what they want from this article. Long live the mediocrity! (2007 – M08)

It was also pointed out that many Romanian journalists cannot write original articles and therefore often embark on a copy/paste procedure without acknowledging their 'source' of information. Moreover, the dignity, morality and ethical values of the journalists are also questioned by forum users as they notice that Romanian reporters seem to have no loyalty to anything except money: they 'kiss the hand that pays the most'. Media in Romania are thus criticised by many forum participants for their increasingly politicised content and for being deeply engaged in political propaganda. This is easily detected by those living outside Romania and in some cases it may even lead them to change their media sources of information about home:

> I used to browse through that newspaper [Cotidianul] quite regularly until not so long ago (and I considered this newspaper to be quite decent in comparison with others). But a few days ago I took a glimpse at some "political" articles and I was so

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[42] Nevertheless, as stated earlier, precisely this limited choice and the predictability of the media content during Christmas and the New Year has rendered some of the forum users nostalgic about the Holidays in the homeland.

disgusted. I don't know how to call this, but what those boys are doing there cannot even remotely be called journalism. That is simply comparable to Scânteia[43] [...] I cannot help but noticing that 80% of the articles are fiercely denigrating the actual president [...] And I am not referring to a simple critique of the president but they are producing texts that are full of hate, hurtful remarks and denigrating articles [...] And if this is the case for this newspaper, I hate to think what the smaller newspapers read like. As for TV channels [...] during my short trips home they have left me with the same impression (2009 – M23).

It emerges so far that Romanians adopt a very critical discourse when they talk about media from the homeland. This 'media talk' online tends to acquire an elitist tone as those forum users which are mostly involved in this critique are precisely the ones that consume information from a great variety of sources.

The failures of the Romanian media to live up to their expectations, determines some of the forum users to respond, at least at the declarative level, by isolating themselves from home country media. This, they argue, is mainly because the realities presented by homeland media are much too painful and disappointing (especially around the time of general elections when the country's problems are brought to the surface). For some forum participants this self-imposed 'exile' from Romanian media translates into a refusal to access Romanian TV or radio by the means of satellite dishes or even to watch Romanian TV/listen to radio online. In spite of their symbolic protest against Romanian media, many of these forum members paradoxically seem to be very informed about 'what happens at home' and this comes mainly as a result of continuing to 'take a peek' at the online editions of Romanian newspapers.

Engaging in the consumption of diasporic media does not seem to be a viable alternative for Romanians in Ireland. Many forum users adopt a critical tone in their talk about the first diaspora-produced newspaper *Informaţia IRL*. While several forum participants feel that the newspaper is a much welcomed product of the Romanian community here and consider it an initiative that they should be proud of, there are also users arguing that the newspaper has an extremely low quality ("a masterpiece of mediocrity" according to some) and hence it has no credibility in the eyes of the diasporic community.

This rather negative feedback seems to be characteristic of the beginnings of the newspaper's activity (2005-2006). As time went by, some of those who critiqued the newspaper in the first place have become its defenders

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[43] The former Communist newspaper.

on the forum from the perspective of their new roles as active contributors to the newspaper. The commitment of these new volunteers to the publication of the newspaper is reflected in a markedly more positive feedback received in relation to its quality.

In an effort to bypass the 'failures' of Romanian media, several forum participants re-oriented themselves and chose to consume more foreign media or even to change the genre by refusing to engage with news media. There are also several forum members who mention that they resort to their families and friends back home in order to keep in touch with homeland news.

There are also a few critical aspects that online Romanians mentioned about Irish (and other foreign) media. Media in Ireland are also perceived to be quite limited due to the very small number of media outlets and the small Irish audience. Thus the Irish public sphere is considered by the Romanian forum users to be dominated by British TV channels.

Furthermore, some Irish newspapers (e.g. the Irish Times or the Irish Independent) are thought to be more 'serious' than others, thus occasional racism and discrimination in the discourse of the local or smaller national newspapers tends to be considered as 'explainable'. Nevertheless, the main critique of Irish and foreign media is of the way these media sources portray Romanian migrants and diversity in general, and this aspect will be discussed in detail in the following section.

In conclusion, their media talk reveals some of the key aspects which define Romanians' problematic relation with the media (in particular homeland media). Forum users generally don't trust media, mainly due to their perceived low quality and their lack of objectivity. It can be argued that this may, to a certain extent, represent a coping mechanism which allows partial detachment from stigma resulting from negative media portrayals.

6.2   Representation, image, identities

A particularly important subset of the scholarship pertaining to media and migration looks at the representation of migrants and ethnic minorities in the mass media. Some forum participants feel that the 'media lynching' of Romania and Romanians is now "a thing of the past". They argue that foreign media seem to have abandoned their almost ritualistic reports about Romania as the land of orphanages and abused children. This opinion is however not overwhelmingly accepted by online Romanians.

Many other forum users felt that discriminatory images still persist in media content (Irish as well as international media) through the continuous association of all Romanians with criminality, begging and poverty as well as many other harmful labels:

> [They show] prostitutes, […] Ceausescu and the People's House, ATM thieves and everything that is wrong with our recent history. I am not denying that these problems exist […] but I suspect there is a more subtle cause for this attack [i.e. Romania's imminent joining of the European Union] (2006 - M19).

In the view of the forum users, these negative representations defy all statistical odds as they focus on the very marginal members of the migrant groups. Exemplifying from the Spanish media, one forum member argues:

> […] when they show images from Romania you only see gypsies in carts, poorly dressed and AIDS sick children. There are also a few images of Romanian criminals [...], and in reality they are actually a minority when you look at the hundreds of thousands of 'legals' and the approximate 2 million 'illegals' working hard for a decent life! (2006 – M30).

It is interesting to note from this citation, that staying illegally and working in a particular country tend to occasionally become symbolically de-criminalised and perhaps even idealised as inherent strategies in the 'struggle for a decent life'.

Furthermore, because these representations are considered by some forum users to be quite remote from the reality, they cannot understand why Romanians (and not other countries as well) are the targets of such portrayals:

> But do we really need all this dirt thrown at us over and over again? After all we are not better or worse than other nations, we have our own dried stumps just like the whole Europe, not to mention America (2006 – F16)

Sometimes the forum participants feel targeted by the media simply for being migrants, and therefore culturally different. They felt that any deeds that are committed by emigrants will clearly get a more negative representation in the media which will make them less socially acceptable:

> When we are talking about immigrants (and I don't mean just Romanians) things are different; and in any country this is the same: a deed committed by a foreigner in your own country is harder to digest than the situation when one of your co-nationals [does it]. The press only makes its duty and they speculate everything only so that they could sell their newspaper [...] (2007 – M06).

To the extreme, some forum users are of the view that it is difficult to find objective information about the migrants in the foreign media.

Moreover, as several forum users seem to suggest, the negative deeds of the immigrants have a higher chance to 'make it in the news' than the same deeds of the natives. And even if they will eventually be brought to public attention, the coverage of the criminal activities of the native population will get a very brief attention (in order to minimise its impact).

There are also numerous situations when online Romanians felt targeted by media due to their nationality. For example, one of the participants on the forum feels annoyed by the incessant repetition of an allegedly anti-Romanian campaign:

> Last week [...] they have repeated for three consecutive days the announcement about the conviction of two Romanians for the rape which took place 2-3 years ago. And on Saturday when I thought that I could finally enjoy some decent news they broadcasted twice within 30 minutes of each other an announcement from some kind of NGO which was warning women to avoid travelling alone at nights and, at the end of the message, the pièce de résistance: "these recommendations come following the conviction last week of two Romanian nationals" etc. (2009 – M13).

The language of discrimination against Romanians is however perceived to be universal as media outlets from practically every country tends to adopt the same negative discourse.

An interesting aspect which was mentioned by members of the forum is that the myths invoked by media in relation to Romanians seem to have slightly changed from before 2007 (when the focus was on orphans, asylum seekers, gypsies) to the period after 2007 (when the more salient issues seem to include various criminal activities (including thefts, begging, rapes etc.) but also news related to gypsies). It emerges thus that, according to the forum participants, the

'gypsy' topic seems to be a remarkable constant in the media representations of Romanians.

Forum members also argue that there seems to be almost a journalistic ritual to the use the two terms 'Rroma' (gypsies) and 'Romanians' interchangeably. Furthermore, this 'confusion' between 'us' and 'them' (i.e. Romanians vs. gypsies) appears to be the main source of stigma associated with the image of Romania and 'being Romanian'. Speaking about one article published in the British newspaper 'The Mirror' one forum user complains:

> '[After they described in yesterday's paper what the gypsy/rroma delinquents did] the next day there was another article in The Mirror on the same topic and the word 'RROMA' was simply transformed into 'a gang of ROMANIANS'. So in the end all the blame falls on us like always. We already have this hard-to-shake-of label which is stuck on to our foreheads […]' (M26)

It has been highlighted so far that generally Romanians on the forum feel that their image is rather negatively constructed by media. While this was somewhat expected, it was however rather surprising to note that in the view of many forum participants the worst type of discrimination tends to occur in the Romanian media.

It was argued that Romanian journalists select only news that reinforce a sense of worthlessness and inferiority about being Romanian by over-reporting the negative actions of Romanians abroad in comparison with the positive ones. Moreover migrants are most of the time referred to as 'căpşunari' [i.e. strawberry pickers][44] regardless of their social status and educational background. Thus, media from home are also accused of lack of respect for Romanian migrants.

Perhaps more surprisingly it was noted that even the initially short-lived, resurrected, and now active diasporic newspaper of Romanians in Ireland has at times offended the Romanian community here. Following a critical editorial article that concluded with the sentence "We will always remain the same, character-lacking, Romanians", one forum user reacts strongly:

> Now you have the explanation why Romanians couldn't give a shit about you [the newspaper], it is because you are making such generalisations and putting all Romanians at the same level [...] If you, the editor, found one Romanian that lacks character then does it mean that all are the same? Maybe you forget that there are also Romanians that work in research, that are lecturers or artists [....] Mr. Journalist, I fairly doubt that you have the qualities needed in order to become the supreme judge of

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[44] This phrase originated in the 1990s when many Romanians (especially from the country-side) were obtaining short-term work permits for Spain and Italy for seasonal jobs in agriculture (in particular strawberry-picking).

Romanians everywhere and to insult them all by the movement of the pen (2005 – M08).

Another forum user is also very intrigued by this apparent lack of respect for Romanians in Ireland and urges for more responsibility on the part of the editorial team. In his view, articles such as the one in discussion can only have a damaging impact on the image and the identities of Romanians in Ireland:

> "Even if I don't have the highest opinions about some of the Romanians here, I don't want to read about these things in the newspaper that is supposed to represent all Romanians in Ireland. You struggle to follow the model of Irish media [which do not denigrate Irish citizens] so that you do not denigrate the image of Romania and Romanians, but you are the very first ones that do this. [...] You say that Romanians have no character... First of all the one that lacks character is the author of the article that has written such a piece and then had no strength of character to sign in order to take responsibility for what he wrote [...] Try for God's sake to be closer to Romanians instead of separating them and seeding hate between them because there is nothing to gain from this. [...] It would not cost you anything to be good Romanians and to stop denigrating the Romanian community here in Ireland […] (2005 – M01)

Demeaning representations in the media are expected by the participants to have strong negative effects in the long term on both their self image, as well as on the public perceptions of Romanians. Forum members indicate that the key problem with negative representations is that these repeated (and over-exaggerated) correlations between Romanians and criminality are expected to eventually create permanent associations in people's minds between 'being Romanian' and 'being a criminal' (thief, rapist, killer etc.).

Besides discussing, disapproving and condemning these representations, there are also occasions when forum members display signs of internalising such portrayals into their identity constructions. A typical example of this particular situation is when news about criminals (usually involving ATM thefts or card skimming) are routinely assigned by some forum members to Romanians in the absence of any clear nationality or ethnicity referent in the actual media content.

As one member of the forum points out, "[…] what we read [in the media] tends to pollute not only our language, but also our minds" (2009 – F01), therefore the impact of media (and in particular media representations) on identity constructions and collective identifications is expected to be extremely significant.

We have so far highlighted some of the main issues which emerge from national, diasporic, Irish and foreign media in relation to the representations of Romanians. What emerges is that Romanians online feel that in spite of a slight shift in the vocabulary used and the myths invoked, representations of Romanians in the media discourse is still mainly negative and biased. Thus, in order to counter these stereotypes and the associated negative effects on their self-esteem and identities, forum members strive to understand the causes for these portrayals and they devote a considerable amount of effort devising strategies for a fairer representation.

Explaining the representational gap

The causes of the negative representations of Romanian migrants are often attributed by forum participants to the media's constant chase of the sensational. Thus media producers construct these portrayals of minorities simply because it is precisely these controversial aspects that are 'selling' content:

> The newspapers will do anything it takes in order to trash our image in the press. The reality does not matter as long as you can twist it to get the article published (2007 – F02)

Several Romanians online have thus signalled a worrying silence on the part of media producers in relation to the most valued members of the Romanians 'diasporic' community, namely the Romanian elites in Ireland (e.g. people who are working in universities, hospitals, in the cultural sphere etc.)

In exchange, shocking aspects always tend to resuscitate the media's interest in the Romanian community. This was the case in 2007 when several Romanian gypsies had temporarily settled in Dublin's M50 roundabout; or in 2009 when a journalist (intending to write a book about murders whose victims were foreign nationals) solicited the help of forum members in order to acquire more information about the life of a Romanian citizen murdered in Dublin; etc.

One of the forum participants however argues that media's interest in Romanian community needs to be seen in close correlation with the historical events that shape the context of media coverage at particular moments.

This view seems to be confirmed by mapping the various occasions when media producers have appealed to the forum (either directly or indirectly through the forum's key members) for factual information or for soliciting their

views in relation to particular subjects. This mapping exercise shows that Irish media were mostly interested in Romanians a few months before and after Romania has joined the European Union on January 1st 2007 and then later on in 2010 when the new legislation about begging near the ATMs was implemented. Romanian media on the other hand were mainly interested in their co-nationals in Ireland on the two occasions of the Lisbon Treaty Referenda (2008 and 2010).

Besides the routine chase for the sensational which may in part explain the negative portrayals of minorities (and in particular the Romanian migrants) in the media, forum participants also highlight the fact that foreign media tend to use Romanians as scapegoats for all crimes committed, as well as the failure of the governments to point out the lucrative effects of migration. Thus, all the evils in one society are imputed to the migrant population (e.g. pressures on the health and educational system etc.).

> [...] the UK and the Irish authorities keep blabbing about the fact that immigrants cause problems in the educational and the health system just because they are trying to make use of them. But they forgot to mention also the contributions that this class [referring to migrants] is bringing to the state budget. One report from the UK shows that the economy of the "empire" has increased by 6 billion pounds due to the immigrants through taxes that they pay to the state. So I wonder then: don't they have equal rights to be treated in a hospital or for their child to learn in school? [...] So if we accept migrants as a source of welfare, we should accept them as well as sources of problems (2007 – M04).

On the other hand, gypsies are also widely scapegoated by media. One forum user believes that gypsies appear more in the media because the 'true' Romanians are invisible, they have jobs and they mind their own business, while gypsies "ramble on the streets to beg and steal" (2006 – M03). However, as one forum member arguments, while there are many cases of high level corruption in all European countries (involving the theft of millions and millions of Euro from public funds), media somehow have developed an obsession with gypsies and their begging and petty thefts (2010 – F01).

Many forum members feel that there is a targeted political campaign against Romanians in the media and to the extreme, some even seem to suspect that there are very well-hidden secret political agendas (e.g. discrediting Romania as a country and its citizens) which powerful media agencies have to carry out.

[„,] There are some hidden agendas that are invisible to us, the 'small ones' But they are sure to reach their target and to get the exact results that those who launch these rumours desire. Rest assured, the Irish have done a lot of bad things where they have emigrated. But the other countries decided to ignore these issues… but this does not seem to be the case in our case (2006 – M01).

Other forum users illustrate the same concerns while referring to the 'Mailat situation' in Italy, when a Romanian gypsy was accused and condemned for allegedly raping and killing the wife of an Italian admiral. The users feel that this event needs to be seen in the wider context of the already tense relations between Italians and gypsies. It can furthermore be added that the above-mentioned attack represented a symbolic act of forced immersion of 'the other' (the dirty, undesirable other) into the upper classes of the native community and this particular aspect has explained the violence of some of the media representations surrounding this event.

In conclusion, online Romanians think that the negative portrayals of migrants (and of Romanians in particular) in the media are never isolated events, but rather are always part of a greater context. Thus in some cases they resort to the media's constant chase for the sensational to explain the media 'lynching'. Others have explained this by bringing into discussion the scapegoating strategy which is inherent in any society which implies that the lower categories tend to get the blame for all society's evils. Nevertheless, it needs to be mentioned that while at times the cause of the predominantly negative representations of Romanians in the media is not 'taken personally' (but is treated as a normal tendency in any society), there are also situations when the 'media attacks' are interpreted as political and clearly targeted against Romanians and this makes them feel vulnerable and stigmatised.

Responses

On several occasions 'withdrawal' reactions could be noted as a consequence of the saturation with negative news about Romanians, and thus some of the forum users confess to refusing to read or hear any more news about Romanians or not having the nerves to finish reading (watching) some of the media content.

However, in many other situations, forum participants reacted promptly to condemn the negative representations of Romanians in the media, in spite of

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asserting that neither the Romanian government, nor the Romanian Community/diaspora in Ireland, or the members of the Romanian diaspora in Ireland can fully control these representations and hinder the undesired contents in order to promote a much more positive image of being Romanian.

As stated earlier in the chapter, one of the most common responses in relation to the negative representations was to engage in scapegoating, thus placing the blame on 'the other' categories of the diaspora, mainly the gypsies. Other forum users also make references to social class as they feel that it is the low quality diaspora members that are the first to get in the news (2007 – M08). This type of coping strategy constitutes however a rather passive mechanism as it often implies no course of action other than becoming discriminatory towards their 'others'. This strategy is however very important from the identitarian discourse perspective as it clearly states the lines of what the group renders itself to be and where it wants to be in terms of the public perceptions and the recognition of their collective identity.

In close correlation with this mechanism, many forum participants highlight the need for acquiring more media coverage that would allow us to present an alternative image to the public. Thus, they often proposed ideas such as: a show about Romanians, their dress styles and their occupations, careers; a focus on the valuable contributions of the Romanian diaspora; images representing the beauty of their homeland which would hopefully rid Romania and Romanians of the demeaning label which is currently attached to the two. As expected, these alternative images represent efforts to differentiate between the worthy Romanians and their 'others', thus attempting to shape an elitist discourse of Romanianness.

Consequently getting coverage in the media (and in particular the Irish media) is absolutely crucial for the new discourses to emerge. According to one of the forum participants, "media get you up, and media get you down" (2008 – M13) and this is the main reason why keeping a 'good' relation with the media is essential for the diasporic identity construction process.

Access to media is needed in order to counter the negative and stigmatising aspects which emerge from media representations of Romanians. Voicing concerns and being granted the right of reply are deemed to be key mechanisms in countering the sometimes blatant discriminatory discourse adopted by media outlets.

Even if access to media coverage is not necessarily perceived to have a major direct impact on the reconfiguration of the collective identifications and on

the reconstruction of their identities on more positive premises, getting the coverage is considered an important step towards increasing people's awareness of us (2006 – M05, M01).

Moreover, an increasing number of forum users tend to argue that Romanians in Ireland should not consider it a privilege the fact of being interviewed by journalists or getting invited to various TV shows in order to discuss the problems of the Romanian community. In exchange, acquiring media coverage is deemed by an increasing number of forum users as a right that they, as a community, have.

It is also essential that Romanians' interaction with media producers and journalists be impeccable and, in the view of some of participants, this implies the need to learn from their past mistakes and to engage in a better selection of community representatives.

It is interesting to note that their interactions with media in the past have been problematic. The general views expressed on the forum are rather critical of the quality of participation and appearance of the various community leaders and representatives in the Irish media in the period 2005-2007. Many forum participants argue that these occasions have been 'wasted' as the representatives have not properly 'exploited' these rare opportunities to get media coverage and to use these occasions for improving the image of the Romanian community in Ireland.

Among the arguments invoked, was that community representatives' grasp of the intricacies of the English language was at times quite weak, while at other times they are criticised for insufficiently preparing their answers before appearing on these shows. Thus, instead of providing clear and 'right-to-the-point' answers to the journalists' questions, community representatives have allegedly engaged in long and unclear answers which left too much room for confusions and misunderstandings. In addition many of these long interventions had to be truncated post-production in order to fit the allocated time slots, thus adding even more to the lack of clarity.

However, some of the forum participants agree that these situations are normal given the community leaders' lack of experience in speaking in public and dealing with media representatives; and this lack of experience leaves the community representatives vulnerable and easy to manipulate into saying the things that the journalist wants them to say.

While there were several occasions when users confessed to feeling marginalised or excluded from both media in Ireland and homeland media,

forum users also mentioned that Romanian diaspora should be more pro-active and not necessarily wait to be approached by media. In exchange, they should take the matter into their own hands and create such opportunities for themselves. Thus, some propose that various events or aspects are documented and filmed by diaspora members themselves and then the images to be sent to all TV channels.

It is interesting to note that there is also no expectation of diasporic media as useful tools in the struggle for voice. However, the internet is a crucial tool in getting their point of view across. For example in the context of the protest organised by Romanians in Ireland against the homeland's political class in 2007, one of the participants in the forum states:

> This is purely Romanian self-pity, 'nobody cares about us'… so what? [...] do you think I care so much if they don't show me on the news? I could even film the event myself and then send it to several TV channels or put it on the internet myself, it's not a big deal (2007 – M08)

When compared to other diasporas, there are many voices on the forum pointing at the fact that Romanian diasporas generally fare worse than others in relation to their media interactions. For some, this is clearly caused by a somewhat vicious cycle: negative images render us less desirable to appear in the media and therefore we become ignored or negatively portrayed.

Moreover, as one user argues, it is rather unlikely that media would change their attitude towards Romanians as they are bound to keep with the same line of discourse so that they don't lose credibility. Thus, these constant negative representations of Romanians in the media make it very hard to get any positive representations of Romanians and Romania, since they will lose authority if they praise the same group which they vilified just days before.

> How can they show a good image now after bad-mouthing for so long? They will probably just drop the whole matter dead. In Ireland and UK there is still this tendency especially now when the country report is due, so we see more and more negative media campaigns about Romania and Romanians [...] (2006 – M17)

In conclusion, in spite of the numerous challenges posed by negative representations and the lack of access to media, Romanians online struggle to devise strategies which would enable them to counter such portrayals and to propose an alternative discourse, one that renders Romanianness free from the stigma attached.

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6.3 Logging on - uses of the forum by Romanians in Ireland

Access to information, advice and support

Findings indicate that a key task of the forum is to provide a source of information and advice for migrants as well as pre-migrants. The latter are the most likely to solicit information about their future journey (either during the planning stage or during the preparation of the already established trip). Their requests for information refer more to job opportunities and work permit regulations; questions about life in Ireland (rent, medical system, taxes and social welfare etc.), but also on occasion they seek encouragement, advice and support.

Newcomers and settled migrants also use the forum for searching for information on a great variety of topics ranging from labour market enquiries to various services (e.g. car mechanics, plumbers, medical professionals, etc.); citizenship applications; consular services and many other issues relevant to their stay in Ireland.

Frequently, when requests for information are posted on the forum, the answers received from the other members are not merely factual, but they would ultimately embed their opinions and advice on the matter. This is particularly important in the case of pre-migrants as evidence emerges about certain occasions when advice received online had a strong influence on their migration decisions. In some cases pre-migrants are discouraged from coming to Ireland and guided instead towards other countries which would, in theory, be more welcoming. Before 2007, the main reason for deterring new migrants to come to Ireland was linked to the multiple challenges raised by labour market restrictions which applied to Romanians in Ireland. Following 2007, the Irish economic crisis represents an additional argument used by the more settled migrants in their 'discourse of discouragement' of pre-migrants.

It emerges thus that through the information and advice given, the forum sometimes acts as a symbolic Ellis Island, where migrants are tested and filtered before they are finally given the 'go ahead' into Ireland.

> You should have known that Romanians don't have the right to work here [and because his job is of big responsibility nobody will hire you in the black economy], it is hard to get here and to get a job. If you don't know anybody here it is even harder. Expenses are high here so go look somewhere else' (2006 – M05)

> If you went to the university just to have an engineer degree, then you are not needed here in Ireland. They have enough engineers with degrees. What they need are people able to do the jobs. If you are good you can own the market. I have friends in Romania that make a nice living out of the job that you have. But nobody gives you anything for free. You have to work and make compromises. So you need to re-analyse yourself. I know that my words may be tough, but this is reality […] Wake up! (2006 - M03)

Pre-migrants often have their limits tested on the forum as the more senior forum members struggle to see whether they live up to their standards. This is especially the case when pre-migrants or the newcomers access the forum in order to ask for information and advice. What is desired of them is often a humble attitude towards the more senior forum members coupled with a strong ambition to succeed. This is part of an initiation ritual as the new forum users often display the same attitudes towards newer members:

> The moment that you have decided to ask for help, you had to be prepared to be 'kicked' and to receive advice that is perhaps useless or maybe counter-productive (2009 – F17)

There are also moments when pre-migrants state their disappointment in relation to the treatment they receive on the forum and argue that users should generally stick to answering the questions factually without inputting their own opinions, judgements and advice:

> It is as if I went to the market and asked for cucumbers, but instead of cucumbers, the seller in the market tried to sell me tomatoes and to convince me that they are better and that I have no idea about vegetables unless I ate tomatoes. That is silly, isn't it? (2009 – F14)

While for these users this kind of response will likely result in a disengagement from the forum, for others, a successful experience with this virtual community has influenced them to continue their online participation and commitment long after having contacted the forum in the initial stages of their migratory journey.

However it also emerges that migrants or pre-migrants don't always get an answer to their questions directly from the forum members: when the enquiry falls outside the areas of 'specialisation' for the forum participants, migrants get directed towards the official institutions involved (e.g. the Embassy, various ministries etc.)[45].

Furthermore, when information and advice was sought by some of the newer users in relation to their undocumented stay in Ireland, it was pointed out

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[45] However, due to the presence of the current consul on the forum, many users confess to saving an incredible amount of time and effort in order to resolve various aspects involving the Embassy.

by some of the more senior users that while the role of the forum is indeed to help Romanians in Ireland, this responsibility should not be extended to 'illegals' (2006 – F02, M40).

> I have absolutely no problem with those that are undocumented in Ireland [...] they should access the forum in peace and quiet, but don't ask us how to make tricks and different combinations on fake passports and other shit like this [...] It is as if you said: 'Hey, I am a Romanian, I have no papers here in Ireland, but have pity on me and tell me a bank that has less guardians so that I can break into it [...](2006 – M40)

This aspect clearly indicates that while this online community may provide a useful tool for pre-migrants and also for migrants in all their stages of integration, the forum may limit their 'service' and responsibility only to some categories of the Romanian diaspora in Ireland. This particular issue will be discussed further in Chapter 9.

Social networks, social capital and collective action

In addition to facilitating access to information and advice for pre-migrants and settled migrants alike, the forum also plays key roles in relation to the connections and interactions between members of the Romanian diaspora and also between them and the 'home' and 'host' societies.

Thus, the virtual space has constituted for many Romanian migrants in Ireland their first point of call and this is where they made their first local 'connections'. This is particularly the case of those Romanians who have settled in cities other than Dublin and who are trying to identify co-nationals in the same city. It is also interesting to note that it is not only the new migrants who appeal to this particular strategy in order to make friends, but settled migrants as well and, from time to time, they access this medium in order to satisfy their nostalgic need to interact with co-nationals. However, as one participant argues, while the forum may not necessarily directly impact on the creation of new friendships, it is undoubtedly important in facilitating face-to-face meetings (2006 – M22).

It is also interesting to note that several members confess to experiencing the forum as a family. This is especially the case of those participants who have been contributing to this online space for a longer time and who have found online support and sympathy in critical moments of their migrants' lives (e.g. citizenship and IBC applications). For other users, the forum

acts as a family because they (i.e. all active members) know each other and thus the sense of security of home and family become re-created online.

Moreover, as previously stated, Irish and Romanian media alike have also occasionally used the forum in order to track particular categories of Romanians needed for media productions. It needs to be noted that, in many cases these attempts were very successful which proves once more that the forum is a key arena where Romanians in Ireland 'hang-out'.

Mainly due to its tremendous role in facilitating a space for interaction and communication for Romanians in Ireland, the forum is perceived by its users to be a supplement for missing social capital. Thus, one user points out that this online space gives the diaspora a sense of being a close-knit community (2008 – M35) and it allows its members to collectively participate in the process of reconfiguration of the image of Romanians in Ireland (2009 – F24).

Thus, the forum is rendered by its members to be rather different from a plain informational website because it allows for interaction and participation in collective discussions, contributing thus to an enhanced diasporic community participation.

It appears however that several users are quite pessimistic about the power of the forum to generate any concrete collective actions and one participant points to the fact that the forum may be just a ground where they are mainly debating and planning, with no tangible actions or outcomes:

> "We are good at rubbing the keyboard until our fingertips are on fire, but then we wonder how come nothing was achieved" (2006 – M02)

However several examples seem to contradict this view: the forum has been a crucial space for discussions and the planning of two very important collective actions of Romanians in Ireland. One refers to the 2006 Memorandum aimed at convincing the Irish government to eliminate the proposed work restrictions which were to be applied to Romanian and Bulgarian citizens following their EU accession. The second example of collective action coordinated by means of the forum was the 2007 protest of Romanians in Ireland against the homeland political class, a protest which was in line with a series of similar other protests organised in most of the other Romanian diasporas.

Consequently, several users perceive the forum as the engine for change in the community. They argue that through the forum Romanians can

fight for a more positive image of the Romanian community and implicitly lessen stigma associated with their identities.

Expressing opinions

The forum is also used by its members to have their say on a wide range of topics, including a variety of issues and problems affecting the Romanian diasporic community in Ireland. This prompts several users to note that the forum is almost the exact image of that particular community, with its problems and challenges, its moments of joy and anguish, etc. (2008 – M33; 2006 – F10; 2006 – F02).

While some users argue that the forum allows everybody to speak freely, there are also several online participants who feel that the forum does not achieve its aim mainly due to the lack of respect between users:

> You encourage this forum to be a target for hit-and-runs. One can no longer exchange information or opinions just like in all the other forums, but one only encounters the all-too-known Romanian style, namely mocking everybody [...] [the administrator] should not let this forum become some kind of circus where people spit on each other and they kick each other... "Virtually" speaking. (2007 – M16).

It needs to be noted however that this vision is particularly shared by the most marginalised users of the forum, namely those that, have entered in multiple conflicts with many of the senior forum participants.

The forum also acts as a space for releasing negative energies, anger, frustrations and stress, thus helping migrants 'survive' their daily problems especially in times of uncertainty (2006 – M01; 2009 – F03; 2008 – F01). Furthermore it also acted as a buffer zone during the times when the various Romanian community organisations were in conflict.

Several discussion threads illustrate the openness of the forum and some members believe it should act like a democracy and consequently be open to everybody and to all opinions (2004 – M34, M28; 2005 – M08; 2006 – M37)

> My opinion is that you cannot exclude anyone and you don't even have to because those who are not part of the community's life and do not have any topics in common will end up excluding themselves. [...] The forum is like a big round table where we sit and talk, nobody is excluded from the start, as long as there are topics and a real communication (not emoticons) there is a

dialogue and everybody is invited [to say their opinions] [...] Any comments are welcome as long as they are for the purpose and welfare of the community. (2005 – M08)

There are also several users who believe that using the forum should be considered a matter of privilege (2004 – M07, M04). While these users constitute a minority among the other forum voices, this particular finding highlights the existence of two parallel discourses within the forum community: one that argues for a more inclusive online community, which would eventually reunite and represent the entire Romanian diasporic community in Ireland; the other direction points to the necessity to maintain the forum as an elite community, one which grants the privilege of its membership only to the 'chosen'.

Source of Romanianness

For many, the forum is significantly inter-linked with their national, ethnic and cultural identities as it constitutes for its participants a source of Romanianness. Thus, according to the confessions of the forum users, this online community is accessed "because it is in Romanian rather than solely because it offers information" (F01).

Some users express their gratitude for the fact that the forum allows them to correct their mistakes and thus (re-)learn how to speak the language correctly (2005 – F03). This is particularly the case for those Romanian migrants who have lived away from the homeland for a very long time and whose main language in the home is no longer their native Romanian.

In the same line of argument, the forum provides those isolated members of the Romanian diaspora in Ireland the chance to 'practice' the language everyday:

> I have spent a lot of time here on the forum, I have received a lot of help here and I need to thank it even for allowing me those 5 minutes of speaking Romanian every day (2007 – M40).

Besides allowing Romanians in Ireland to practice speaking Romanian, the forum also allows them to 'keep the language clean', i.e. without contaminating it with too many foreign words, which would result into a hybrid language which the forum members call 'Romglish'. For example, when a new member posted a message which contained many spelling and grammar errors, another user reacted promptly: "Try to write correctly in Romanian. We are

placing a lot of emphasis on this" (2009 – F20). The collective 'we' clearly denotes the online community and its set of deeply embedded (and often unspoken) rules and norms.

Moreover, the forum constitutes a 'sacred' space where respect for Romanians and Romanianness is of key importance. For example, when pre-migrants or newcomers to Ireland begin their posts with critical assertions about Romania and Romanian people, forum users swiftly react:

> You can't post on a forum of Romanians things like 'this shit-hole of a country'. I tend to think that it was just a spelling mistake and what you meant was 'this shit in Romania' (2006 – M38).

This argument is particularly important as it highlights the fact that users find it absolutely essential to keep the forum as an 'oasis' of respect at a time when Romanianness has become such a despised identity.

> Because this forum was meant to get us together a little bit and to feel respected even of others don't respect us (2004 – M20)

Thus, this online space seems to help the participants to create a sense of unity of Romanians as a group and it gives them an opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions protected from the 'outside' environment where they feel excluded or disrespected by others.

This points to the fact that the forum seems to provide the means to keep diaspora together in spite of its heterogeneity

> […] we are here firstly because we are Romanians and that should be the most important thing. Each of us is different, we have different opinions to each other and maybe this is what makes dialogue possible. If we would all be the same then maybe we would have nothing to talk about (2006 – M01)

The forum thus provides the narrative that keeps the community together and it appears that, as one user concludes, it can actually be compared to Romania (2004 – M34). Hence, it becomes a miniaturised equivalent of the national, a reconstruction of the national abroad.

Discussion and conclusions

This chapter highlighted some key aspects of Romanians online and their use media. Findings indicated that Romanians consume media from a wide variety of sources (media from home and the host society, diasporic media as well as other foreign media) and, from this point of view, they seem to have engaged with media diets similar to other diasporic populations, such as the Greek Cypriot in London studied by Georgiou (2006) and the Polish in Ireland (Kerr, 2007) just to name a few.

Empirical data collected confirms that media from home is mainly consumed by Romanian migrants online in order to keep in touch with what happens at home and in the lives of friends and families there. Forum users also confess to using transnational media in order to make comparisons between the home and host society which further impacts on the reconstruction of their plans for return, but also, at a deeper level, on the continuous revision and re-shaping of their imagined homeland. It was further added by some users that homeland media allow them to keep involved with the motherland and to preserve a sort of continuity with their previous lives there. These findings do not vary significantly from the conclusions of other studies on the topic (Elias et al., 2007; Aksoy and Robins, 2003; Tsagarousianou, 2001; Lin and Song, 2006; Georgiou, 2001).

It is however important to mention that, while much of the existing scholarship engaging with diasporic and transnational media argues that they play an important role in relation to the intense feelings of nostalgia experienced by migrants, these findings were not fully supported by the present study. Thus, while nostalgia is nevertheless an important component of Romanians' diasporic lives, it appears that it does not play a significant role in the decision to engage in the consumption of media from home.

Foreign media (including here both Irish as well as a various set of other international media sources) have been extensively used by Romanians in Ireland mainly for information purposes and, to a great extent, this fits with similar findings encountered by Kerr (2007) on the Polish community in Ireland.

It was also pointed out in this chapter that Romanians on the forum rely greatly on the available online media content (newspapers, TV and radio online streaming etc.) in their forum discussions. The lack of a distribution network of Romanian-produced media to Ireland explains only partially forum members' preference for the online content. Another key factor in understanding this

predilection lies in the pattern of interactions between forum members. Thus, when users start a debate over a certain topic emerging from the media, they feel compelled to ensure that the topic is well-known to the other forum participants. Hence, they provide web-links where everybody can access the material before engaging in comment.

The internet is thus playing a crucial role for the Romanian community in Ireland, as it acts as a gateway to other media content. This represents an interesting situation as the internet becomes a key tool that Romanians use to satisfy almost all of their media needs. Hence, the internet emerges as a medium that seems to blur the boundaries between written, audio and visual media and blends together these varied media sources.

In addition, findings indicated that the web (and the forum in particular) acts as an important tool for information, advice and support for the community, in line with similar studies which place the internet as the first point of call for help and information about the homeland as well as the host country (Kerr, 2007; Hiller and Franz, 2004). The internet also emerges as 'the glue' that enhances the bonding of the diaspora members, thus impacting positively on the process of collective identification and community construction. Lin and Song (2006) also noticed a similar tendency in their study of the immigrant communities in Los Angeles.

Moreover, the online forum allows Romanians in Ireland to express their opinions and to discuss them with other members of the online community, to express their anger and concern in relation to the problems affecting the diasporic community, the homeland and host society. These aspects were also observed by other scholars who saw the internet as a key tool for empowerment and acting on collective issues (Elias et al., 2007; Lin and Song, 2006; Parker and Song, 2006).

Last but not least, the forum was considered by its users as a source of Romanianness, which clearly denotes the importance of this online space in the construction and articulation of their cultural identities. According to many other studies, the web provides a sense of immediacy and closeness among those that are geographically distant (Triandafyllidou and Wodak, 2003) and a space for articulating diasporic identities (Nedelcu, 2000; Chan, 2005; Srinivasan, 2006; Trandafoiu, 2009).

Referring to the well-known debate among various scholars as to whether diasporic media are cohesive or rather corrosive in respect of the process of integration into the host society, the current study did not find any

support for the argument that by consuming transnational or diasporic media Romanians would manifest a refusal to integrate. On the contrary, the very diverse media diet of Romanians online could only point to a hybrid and fluid identity. What was noted in the case of Romanians in Ireland was a tendency of the internet (and in particular the forum) to act as both an element of cohesion (that brings Romanian diaspora in Ireland into a common space, but also as a corrosive ingredient (as some narratives seem to indicate an emerging elite-style sub-diaspora, one that aims to detach from the so-called problematic social categories of the wider Romanian diaspora in Ireland).

Aspects linked to media representation have been widely discussed on the forum as the users struggle to make sense of how they are portrayed by media and who is to blame for the negative image that Romanians have. Forum members often make references to media tendencies that aim to demonise migrants and this is in line with countless studies highlighting the discrimination experienced by migrants through media representations (Alia and Bull, 2005; van Dijk, 2000; etc.). Moreover, the fact that discrimination occurs mostly in relation to the groups that are at the margin of society (as is the case of gypsies, or the new migrant groups in a society) confirms Kostarella's (2007) argument about the predisposition of media to focus upon others who are already at the periphery of society.

Romanians online have not identified any significant change over the years in relation to representations of their co-nationals in the media. To a great extent, this aspect informs Wilson and Gutierrez's (1985) optimistic view that representations will evolve from an exclusionary phase to an integrated coverage stage. In exchange, forum members seemed to confirm the emergence of new and more subtle forms of discourses of racism in the media targeted against them as migrants and as Romanians.

Furthermore, several citations have pointed towards the fact that users suspect an intricate media strategy to reflect extensively on the negative deeds of the cultural others while, at the same time, being very brief about the negative deeds committed by natives. Although this is only a perception that online Romanians expressed (rather than the conclusion of an extensive analysis of media coverage of migration and diversity) it seems interesting to note the similarity between the perceptions of Romanians online and the findings presented by van Dijk's (2000) and Pettigrew's (1979) research.

Interestingly, forum users' perceptions of the representations of Romanians in the media illustrate a stunning reiteration of the traditional myths

described by other studies (Gabriel 1998; Philo and Beattie, 1999; Cottle, 2000; Mollard, 2001; Kaye, 2001; Wood and King, 2001; UCC, 2001; NCCRI, 2003) in relation to migrant population. Romanians also confess to feeling portrayed by media as criminals and as a menace to the natives, as an AIDS ridden nation and as a burden to the state etc.

In order to explain this negative imagery and this pre-formed discourse Romanians argue that media's main role is that of chasing and representing the sensational and hot topics of the moment. Furthermore this leads to a mediated image of the Romanian community that has little or no connection to reality. A EUMC study (2006b) highlights in a similar manner the fact that Muslim communities in various countries argued that media reflect a biased and distorted reality by focusing only on the extreme and abnormal events involving their community.

The impact of these negative representations is expected by Romanians to be strongly reflected in public attitudes and opinions about them. Existing literature has however indicated that there is no definite and straightforward relation between these two aspects. Instead, we need to look for the role of media in relation to creating awareness around certain issues (Husband, 2005). In the present study, Romanians also pointed to the importance of creating awareness around their alternative identity discourses and, in order to achieve this, online Romanians saw it as essential to get coverage in the media and to use the internet efficiently.

Moreover, many of the views expressed on the forum argued that most of the negative media representations of Romanians impacted significantly on their identities: feeling humiliated about the negative stereotyping and developing feelings of inferiority about who they are as a diasporic community. Hence, for many of the members, the forum represented a retreat into a safe place where they could recollect the positive aspects of Romanianness and use these symbols to regain the lost respect for their homeland, their language and culture and ultimately for their co-nationals. Thus, by acting as a public sphere where identities and meanings are negotiated, the forum may eventually lead to a major reconfiguration of what it means to be Romanian.

What is interesting to highlight is that forum data seems to point to the fact that homeland media and, occasionally, diasporic media as well have been identified by Romanians online as important factors in the perpetuation of the negative imagery associated to Romanianness. This aspect is very relevant as much of the existing scholarship is rather quiet about such aspects thus focusing

exclusively on the negative discourse contained in the mainstream media in the host society.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned finding tends to partly contradict a great portion of current literature on the topic of ethnic and diasporic media, which have been so far assigning them an important role in escaping invisibility and vilification in the mainstream media (Husband, 2005; Kerr, 2007; Parker and Song, 2006).

In addition to the negative media representations, forum participants argued that their experiences with media representatives have also been problematic and extremely disappointing. This aspect seems to concur with other research findings (EUMC, 2006b) which state that various Muslim communities have also expressed discontent in relation to their experience with media producers and journalists and pointed towards the tendency to have their statements misquoted and taken out of context.

Besides mapping the negative imagery used by media to describe Romania and Romanians, forum members also strive to collectively find the solution in relation to what needs to be done to correct these stigmatic associations with their image.

Several points of view expressed by the Romanian online community argue that they find it very hard and perhaps even impossible to shift the media discourse and promote a more positive image. This bears very close resemblance to Braham's conclusions (1982) that media tend to ignore contrary evidence in order to conserve its credibility.

However the majority of forum participants highlighted the role it played in constituting a space where collective feelings of revolt, embarrassment and stigmatised identities are expressed. In this space, diaspora struggles to mobilise their efforts to change the image of the Romanian community and 'liberate' the Romanian identity from the stigma attached.

In conclusion, the forum is perceived by its users as an essential space for debate, a "round table" where Romanians discuss their lives in Ireland and the 'fate' of the motherland. The forum also acts as a place where Romanian migrants can release some of the tensions and frustrations which are inherent in the first stages of the integration into a different society.

It becomes evident that the Romanian community forum represents a space that is produced and re-produced everyday through the contributions of members of the Romanian community.

Taking all these aspects into consideration, it can be noted that romaniancomunity.net acts as a public sphere, understood in the broader sense than Habermas's rather strict definition. It represents a space that allows Romanians to come together and discuss the matters that they consider of outmost importance and to attempt to correct some of the problematic issues. Furthermore, by facilitating the participation of Romanians from various locations in this virtual space, the forum has the premises to enhance the transnational dimension of the Romanian diaspora.

Last but not least, it represents a lively arena for the circulation of information and collective negotiation of cultural meanings and identities of Romanian diaspora in Ireland. These findings are consistent with data from similar research (Miller & Slater, 2000; Chan, 2005; Elias et al., 2007) arguing that the internet and in particular discussion forums play a complex role in articulating diasporic identifications and feelings of belonging.

On the forum of the Romanian community, 'identity talk' is everywhere. Messages posted provide an insight into how Romanians define themselves and how they are defined by others. In conclusion, the Romanian community forum represents a public sphere where members of the diaspora negotiate and articulate their sense of Romanianness while also striving to envisage solutions to address the challenges of a stigmatised diasporic (or ethnic) identity.

In line with existing literature (Karim, 1999; Tsagarousianou, 2004), these findings seem to confirm that the reconstruction and re-negotiation of identities takes place through everyday interactions, such as the daily posts on the forum. In the light of these findings, the Romanian community forum stands out as one of the key arenas where cultural meanings are constructed and reconstructed in everyday talk and diasporic identities are shaped and articulated.

Chapter 7 – Homesick or sick of home? Stories of hate and love in the Romanian narratives of homeland

Overview of the chapter

This chapter sets out to evaluate the different discourses that online Romanian migrants in Ireland construct when they refer to their ancestral home. It begins with a brief overview of the country and its people, a discussion which aims to map the main ideas and expressions used by Romanians in Ireland when describing their country of origin and its people. It highlights their opinions about the key problems that mark their country of origin and also the roles that these issues played (and to some extent still continue to play) in their decision to migrate and/or return.

Many interesting findings emerge in relation to the rather mixed picture diasporic Romanians build about their country of origin and their co-citizens and this chapter endeavours to interpret these images and discourses of the homeland through the lens of diasporic identity construction.
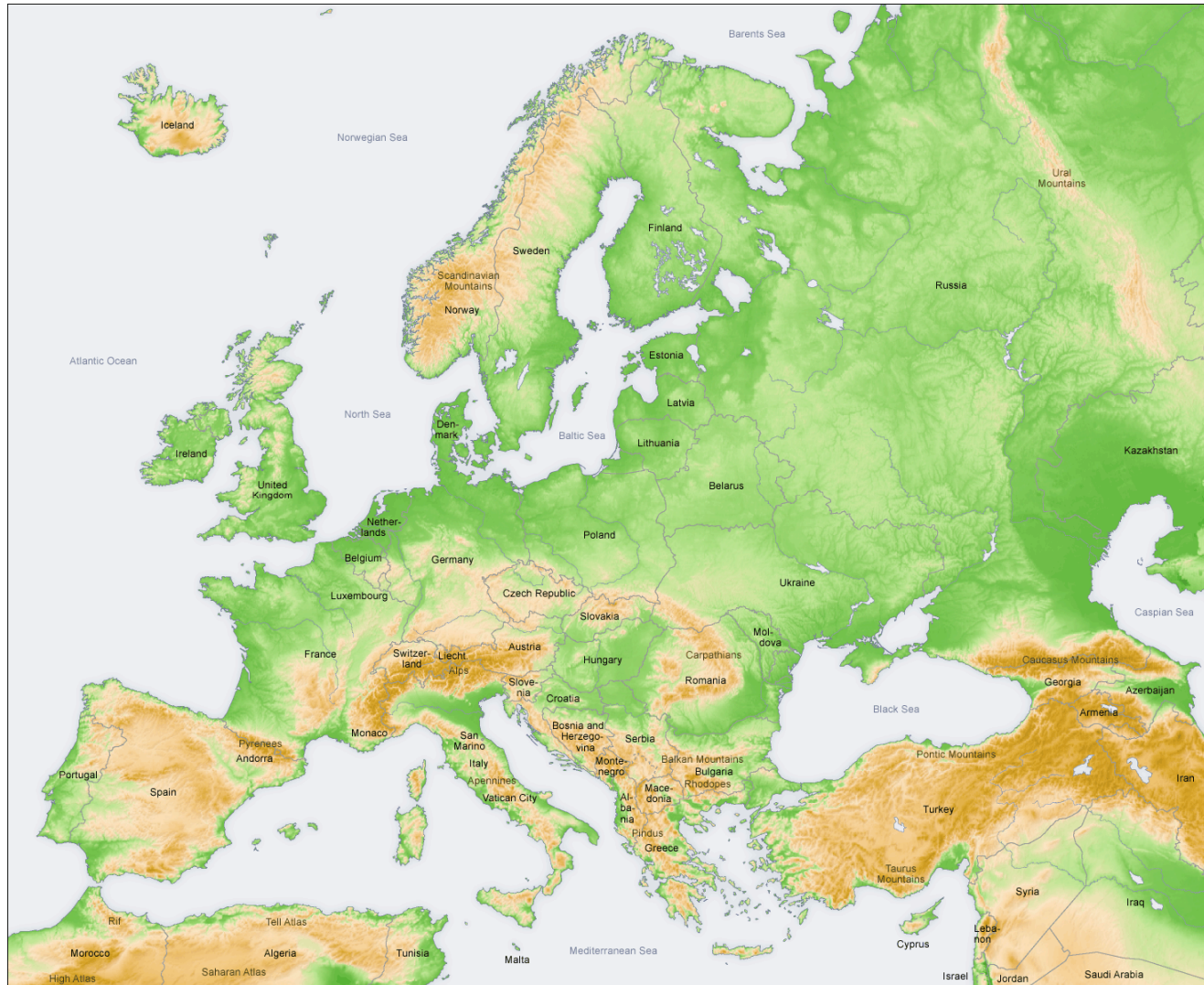
The chapter then proceeds to discuss the relation that Romanians in Ireland develop and maintain with their country of origin based on their feelings of nostalgia, patriotism, national pride (or shame) and their perceived duty towards the mother-land.

The final part of the chapter discusses several key dimensions stemming from the 'Us' vs. 'Them' discourse employed by forum members in relation to 'being diasporic' vs. 'being Romanian in Romania'.

Alternative geographies? Where are they exactly on the map?

Discussing the image of the homeland in the imaginary of the forum members, an intriguing dilemma is posed in relation to the position that Romania occupies in Europe. Analysing the online debates of Romanians in Ireland it becomes evident that even a science of physical borders (as geography is) can be subjective and allow for many alternative visions. In 2009, a forum discussion thread dealt with the complex issue of Romania's geographical, cultural and strategic position in Europe. There were voices that placed Romania (geographically, as well as culturally and historically) together with the other Central European countries in a European continent that extends its borders to the Ural Mountains (see Fig. 1).

Other forum members argued that the country is clearly placed in the East of Europe and highlighted the fact that many Western Europeans are not even aware of the Ural Mountains border. In this scenario Romania was unlikely to have been considered part of Europe until the last two waves of EU accession created a more inclusive definition of Europe and Romania was recognised as part of the Eastern European block (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 7.1. *Romania in Europe (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe)*

Fig. 7.2. Romania in European Union (Source: http://www.eucountrylist.com/map.html)

When actual distances were analysed, arguments indicated that Romania is placed to the East of Europe rather than in the centre. As one of the forum participants pointed out, there are nearly 650 km between Bucharest and Istanbul and more than 2200 km between Bucharest and Amsterdam and this perspective definitely places Romania in the South-Eastern Europe.

These different visions of Romania articulate an interesting debate about the distinction between the actual geographical borders and the cultural geographic claims. Forum members pointed out that other countries (such as the Ukraine) are also making similar assertions about belonging to the Central European space. However as the forum discussants argued, these claims can only become legitimate if/ and when they are acknowledged and recognised by others:

> […] I don't know how relevant it is for us to debate about Romania's geographical positioning on the European map as long as we treated [negatively] the way we are… (2009 – M01)

This last paragraph summarises one of the key aspects of Romanians' identity: their image in the eyes of 'the Others' tends to put a significant constraint on who they are and who they claim they are. The subtle meanings

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deeply embedded in this sentence will unfold throughout the chapter as the narratives of Romania and being Romanian take shape.

Romania: the land of all the problems

Having highlighted some of the alternative visions of Romania's geographical, political and cultural position in Europe, the focus will shift next to map the views and opinions that Romanians in Ireland express when they discuss their homeland and its citizens.

There are not many positive things that Romanians have to say about 'living in Romania'. For many, it is a country that offers no opportunities for young people to earn a decent living; for the highly educated people, it is a country where they cannot promote their career. They feel that salaries are at an incredibly low level and that this pay level hardly reflects their educational achievements, their skills or competences. For some of the speakers, the experiences are dramatic. Below is the account of a pre-migrant, a young male with third level education who appeals for help to the forum members in finding a job:

> […] I'm dying here in this country… I have got to a point where I am working for free in Romania just so that I can do my own profession and to get some work experience and seniority […] I feel that life is passing me by and I have no chance in this shit-hole of a country (2006 – M10)

Starting a business in Romania is also perceived by forum users to be a nearly impossible task. The lack of economic stability makes it hard to plan your business in the long term. In addition to this, bureaucracy, corruption and bribes add to the burden of a business start-up.

Corruption does not only affect entrepreneurs but just about everybody in the society. Many forum members seem to think that corruption is the new religion in Romanian society, more like a way of 'doing things Romanian-style' (2007 – M02). Starting with the political leaders and company managers to the regular people in their everyday lives, everybody gives and takes bribes in exchange for favours. As one forum member mockingly remarks, this generalised top-to-bottom corrupt system would give 'our totally corrupt and fascinating country' an edge in the European Union as we could use our extensive 'experience' in the field and teach all the other members a few useful lessons in being corrupt and its advantages (2007 – M03). It is interesting to

note that even for those that have relocated to Ireland for a long time (as is the case for M02 and M03 cited above), the experiences of corruption and giving bribe are unforgettable.

The legal system is perceived to be totally inefficient in fighting corruption. Many think that laws are either conceived to suit the interests and purposes of the powerful or are simply not applied. This constitutes the main reason why people have completely lost their trust in the police force and justice system. When failures of the justice system become noticed abroad, they cause Romanians in Ireland a huge embarrassment and also result in damaging effects to their identities by reinforcing the stigma of being Romanian.

> And I don't feel like saying out loud that I am Romanian. It depends on the circumstances… sometimes I am from Transylvania or… Christmas Island…! (2006 – M05)

For many forum members, living in Romania takes nerves of steel in order to survive and they recall the lack of money, bureaucracy, corruption, and the difficult interactions with rude public officers as some of the main causes of stress. Also, according to their views, these are the main factors that determined thousands (and perhaps millions) of Romanians to search for a better life abroad. One forum participant who, at the date of posting, had been in Ireland for four years describes his former life 'at home' versus his current life in Ireland:

> Here life is good. I can't say it is not stressful. Everyday I find another factor of stress. However these factors are different from the ones in Romania. There actually there was only one factor of stress. How do I pay the rent, how do I buy food? Is it going to be enough to live on? The salary has never lasted for the whole month. And bear in mind that I had a second job as well: I used to repair computers and my wife was giving private tuition [in Math] and it was still hard to manage. I couldn't even consider saving any money for a house or a car. Unless you have parents to help you in Romania you have no chance. I was lucky that I was going from time to time in Austria and I was getting good money there and then on my return to Romania we were spending that money (2004 – M04).

Romania's infrastructure is also harshly criticised by Romanians abroad. The road network is said to be not only badly maintained, but also poorly developed to cater for the country's existing traffic or for increasing development needs. In the forum members' views more highways and more airports are needed in order to attract both business and tourism.

In more recent years, the health system has also attracted negative comments from users. Numerous references are made to the lack of funding in

the health sector in Romania and to the inability to get treatment without having to bribe the medical personnel generously.

There is however mixed evidence about the education system. Some Romanians on the forum feel that the system is better in Romania as school and parents have more control over children in comparison with other Western European countries. Not all forum members share these views though:

> Here [in Ireland] they wear a uniform at school (and I feel that this is a sign of respect for the school you attend). In Romania the dad buys the latest generation car for their son or daughter, and the latest mobile phone; and if [in Romania] you try to tell your 16 or 17 year old neighbour to baby-sit your child while you have to go somewhere I can guarantee you from my own experience that they won't (2007 – M03).

Some feel that education had a better quality during the communist regime and, more importantly, it was free and mandatory for every child. However many Romanians on the forum feel that the educational system has now taken a turn for the worse: tuition is becoming of lower and lower quality and children begin experiencing these effects.

In relation to third level education, there seems to be a consensus between forum speakers as they argue that the programmes are not at all adapted to the practical requirements of today's workplace, hence the knowledge acquired in the university is mainly obsolete. This seems to be particularly the case for the technical fields and some of the forum members suggest that even though Romanian students tend to study more than the Irish (in terms of the number of hours of classes), what Romanians learn "will almost equal to 0 on the labour market" (2004 – F04).

Romania's problems were brought even more to the forefront in the year preceding the country's joining the European Union. During this period the critical reports of Romania's slow progress were extensively scrutinised by Romanians in Ireland on their online communication platform. To a great extent their opinions seemed to echo the conclusions formulated in these Country Progress Reports. Forum contributors felt that Romania was not yet ready to join the EU, before "we cleaned our back yard from communists" (2006 – M05) and 'speed up the pace' (2006 – F05). On the other hand there are voices which tried to counter these feelings of inferiority that Romanians have in relation to the European Union by suggesting that they are no worse than other EU members when they had to prepare their accession process:

We shouldn't always be so humble in front of them, we are not slaves! We have to fit many criteria in order to join the EU, and other countries namely Ireland had no problems joining when in fact it had similar problems in the main areas where we have 'red flags' as well! [e.g. securing the borders; high level corruption] […] I'm not saying that the level of corruption is not problematic in Romania, but they should take a look in their back garden before they speak about us. (2006- M01)

The feelings of shame about the country's apparent lack of progress have not ceased after 2007 when Romania joined the European Union. On the contrary, the sense of inferiority seems to be working its way deeper into the Romanian identity narratives. For example when many countries (including Ireland and the UK) decided to impose work restrictions for Romanian and Bulgarian workers, people felt that they are part of a nation of undesirables and that, ironically, even 'Zimbabwe will soon impose work restrictions on Romanians' (2008 – M06)

While all these problems summarise the main issues which characterise the current day Romania, it would be inaccurate to assume that these aspects only affect the ones still living there. As the map of Romania's problems takes shape in the forum narratives, it also becomes more apparent that these narratives carry potentially negative impacts on Romanian migrants' attachment to their homeland. There are multiple ways in which the situation in Romania imprints on the lives of migrants.

On the one hand migrants keep in touch with their family and friends at home and they tend to see the country not only through diasporic eyes, but also through the eyes of their families at home. Thus, the homeland's sad realities appear as extremely real and immediate even for those living thousands of kilometres away from 'the source'. According to the opinions expressed on the forum these images also impact greatly on the evaluation and re-evaluation of their decision to return.

On the other hand forum members mention undergoing negative feelings and experiences when returning 'home' for holidays. For some it is the immediate reaction they get when they encounter the Romanian Customs Officers at the airport: the fact that they are not smiling and they treat one like dirt is for many forum members a sign that one has left 'civilised European space' and is now crossing the border and re-entering the 'land of problems'.

Upon return, the country is also experienced as an expensive and stressful experience:

> I am going home and I stay with my folks or friends and still I end up spending more than if I went on an exotic holiday. I come back tired and angry. I need another holiday. Therefore I go back quite rarely and I would rather take a holiday in a country where relaxation is guaranteed (2008 – M02)

Other opinions expressed on the forum seem to suggest that these negative experiences while visiting the homeland cannot be generalised as everything depends solely on the places that somebody visits. Hence while visiting some places may bring disappointment and pessimism about any potential changes for the better, other cities and places show Romanians, upon their return a different and more pleasant face.

This section clearly indicated that Romanians on the forum do not have a positive image of their homeland's progress and situation. Some opinions describe the situation as extremely sad, calling their ancestral home 'the Valley of Sorrows'[46]. It comes as no surprise that several Romanian migrants mentioned that their decisions to leave the homeland stems from a feeling that Romania is the 'wrong country' for them and consequently anywhere is better than Romania. The following section highlights the forum members' opinions about what defines a 'Romanian' and what sets Romanians apart from other nations.

Romania's people

Several forum members argue that an important distinction needs to be made between Romania as a country that needs to be loved and the people that live in it. This resonates with one of the most popular sayings in Romania: 'Romania is a beautiful country, too bad it is inhabited'.

> Romania is not to blame for the fact that things are not going great there. We don't have to say that Romania sucks just because some of Romanians suck. Most Romanians are honest and hard-working people. I am so annoyed when those writing about Romania make fun of it and call it either RRomania [reflecting an association with the word 'rroma' - the name used sometimes for gypsies in Romania] or Romanica [a diminutive resembling a naïve, little girl's name] (2009 – M10)

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[46] The 'valley of sorrows' is a reference to one of the most popular Romanian children stories by Petre Ispirescu and entitled '_Tinereţe fără bătrâneţe, şi viaţă fără de moarte_' [Youth without old age and life without death]. In the story, the 'valley of sorrows' represents the liminal space between two different worlds: the world of the living and the world of the immortals. It symbolises the trials and tribulations that one needs to surpass before achieving a superior state) in this case, immortality.

This reflection indicates that Romania represents at the basic level a geographical space that cannot carry any blame for its own situation or lack of development. It is the responsibility of people to make Romania a better place which will eventually inspire more pride in its citizens.

Some of the characterisations made by forum members refer to Romanians in general, while others mark a clear difference between Romanians 'at home' and Romanians abroad. Some positive aspects have been mentioned about 'being Romanian', but there is a great variety of shades in which the picture of the typical Romanian is painted by forum members.

On the one hand Romanians are praised for being good workers. There seems to be a significant difference from this point of view between Romanians 'at home' and those who have migrated. As one forum user mentions, Romanians only show a healthy work ethic when working abroad and this is mainly because of an existing vicious cycle between the level of pay and the work ethos. As the forum member exemplifies, when workers are not properly paid (as is the case in Romania), they tend to work less hard and, consequently, because they are not working hard, their level of pay does not improve.

On the other hand, forum participants feel that Romanians are renowned for their excellence in the IT field and also that, as migrants, they are generally hard-working migrants regardless of the type of job they do.

Another positive element mentioned is that Romanians find it easy to adapt to each situation. However while this is sometimes achieved through will-power and determination, in other situations the methods they adopt are said to be less Orthodox:

> It seems that the true Romanian is the one who has learnt to push and shove… to manage situations... He is the one who has the guts to cut in front of the queue. To disobey the law without a trace of guilt if his personal interests require so… (2006 – M09)

This last quote points to other aspects which forum users see as a negative characteristic of Romanians, namely selfishness and individualism. Thus instead of bonding with other co-citizens and contributing to the collective community construction (either online or offline), Romanians are said to be obsessed with earning money. They would work uninterruptedly, doing overtime, getting a second job only so that they increase their earnings:

> […] they are so desperate as if there's a shortage of money in Ireland. They do not have a social life, not to mention a cultural one. […] I am not saying that money is not important, but we should want something more from life. And this is the main

reason why Romanians are not united, they are indifferent to each other and they envy each other. (2006 – M01)

On the one hand this quote seems to point out that Romanian migrants may have very different objectives when they decide to leave the country. While some decide to stay for a short while until they reach their financial goal, for others the migratory project encompasses more intricate goals. On the other hand the same paragraph seems to suggest that forum members feel that Romanians generally lack the civic spirit and social unity that a community needs. In their opinion this will further negatively impact on shaping a collective identity for Romanians in Ireland.

The reason why Romanians don't like to meet and socialise with other Romanians represents a big dilemma and they are suggesting multiple explanations for what they call "the mentality of standing divided". Disenchantment with the situation at home as well as the stigma and shame associated to being labelled as 'Romanian' are suggested key reasons why Romanians in Ireland do not participate more in the collective events (national day celebrations, protests etc.):

> […] Romanians are not interested in the National Day celebrations or in any other forms of association that might remind them that they are Romanians […] [They must think] So what if my son will never know who Stefan the Great [Prince of Moldavia] was? And so what if my son will think that his father was born somewhere west of Asia. […] For these people the only thing that counts is that they left that shitty country behind and that they can now hide their Romanianness in the box. These people say they are Romanians only when we get Gold medals in competitions, otherwise he calls his own people… "these fucking Romanians" (2007 – M04)

For some online discussants, the lack of unity of the community has also deep roots in the generalised lack of trust between Romanians: During the Communist regime Romanians were said to betray even their close friends and family to the Securitate for meagre benefits or to escape from accusations themselves. After the Communist regime ended in 1989, when Romanians had got the green light to hold passports and to travel outside the country, more rumours emerged about their lack of honesty. It was also a common belief that many Romanians residing abroad illegally would collaborate with local Police and betray their friends and acquaintances (who were also residing illegally) in exchange for legal status. Although there is not enough proof to support these hear-say accusations, it becomes apparent that many Romanians in Ireland do not trust their co-ethnics.

In their efforts to separate from other fellow-citizens, Romanians may sometimes adopt radical strategies:

> You see a Romanian woman in the street with her child and as soon as she hears that you speak Romanian she will quickly [switch to English and] call her child: '"Kevin, come to mother!" and then she simply pretends she can't see you. But what she forgets is that she is wearing a leather jacket and has a hair-do that screams 'Eastern European' […] and she also carries a plastic bag in her hand. This all means that the person does not feel very good about herself and she tries to pass as someone that she will never be (2007 – M08).

The last quote can also be interpreted from a different angle, by focusing on some of the desperate efforts made by some Romanian migrants to Ireland to assimilate. By naming their children traditional Irish names and by talking to them in English, parents may hope to reduce the so-called 'handicap' of the first generation of Romanian migrants in Ireland. From this perspective their separation from other Romanians and the Romanian culture suggests more that just a desire to escape the 'Romanian' label, but also as a strong desire to belong to Irish society.

Speaking about their co-citizens 'at home', forum users feel that homeland Romanians tend to be constantly unhappy, they always complain and criticise and they are also too pessimistic about their chances of having their say in turning the country's situation around:

> 'When I go on holiday back home everybody speaks of 100.000 Euro with a remarkable easiness but they barely have money for an ice-cream; they beep[47] [instead of calling] because they don't have enough credit to call. They all 'know' what needs to be done, but nobody actually does it and that drives me crazy… They all have this 'Let's do it!' attitude but it's so funny that if you ask them to do something they start making excuses that there is so much corruption, that there are no funds, that the floods are coming, or that it is too windy, or they complain that the Securitate is still in place and they listen to their phone-calls when in fact they are just a bunch of nobodies and no authority would

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[47] The 'beep' was a very popular means of communicating through the use of mobile phones (especially for young and not so affluent people). In the first years after the mobile phones companies penetrated the Romanian market, the charges for both calls and text messages were quite prohibitive for some categories of Romanians. Given this situation many pre-pay users would communicate with their friends by using 'the beep'. 'The beep' refers basically to the act of making a call to a person while the person who receives the call consciously does not pick up the call and rejects it (thus confirming that 'the message' has been received). The 'beeping' strategy functions on the basis of a pre-set simple code between two or more people: for example, one beep may reflect that a person is already waiting at the meeting place, while two beeps mean that the person will be late. This way essential communication can take place and messages are transmitted for free. As the mobile phone operators became more and more competitive, and their charges have dropped significantly, the 'beep' strategy has become a thing of the past for most Romanians. People still using this technique today are generally the target of jokes and mockery in the society.

have even a remote reason to listen to their phone calls… (2007 – M08)

Blaming others for the disasters appears to be yet another well known feature of 'being Romanian' in the eyes of the forum members. In their view, Romanians like to self-pity and are obsessed with being persecuted by others. This translates into a deeply embedded pessimism about the power to change their fate and the fate of the country they live in. One of the forum contributors describes these pessimistic people as grey shadows that crawl on crowded city streets in something that resembles a Dickensian landscape.

In the forum members' opinions, while some Romanians are not optimistic about potential solutions for change, others seem to show even more problematic 'mentalities': they refuse to improve themselves and tend to adopt an 'I couldn't care less' attitude, a legacy of the communist mentality which, the forum participants feel, will stand in the way of acquiring an occidental mind-frame.

Online discussions highlight other negative aspects. Reacting to the manifold media representations portraying Romanians as uncivilised and criminals, many forum users are upset and sad. However some also view that "there is rarely smoke without fire". They find that these categories of Romanians (i.e. the criminals and the uncivilised) carry most of the blame for their problematic image abroad and for the fear that Westerners feel when they encounter Romanians. Some forum users recall from their experience different moments when such Romanians created a huge embarrassment for them. Most examples include references to the AerLingus flight to Bucharest, such as getting up from their seat before the seat-belt sign is turned off after landing; witnessing arguments between Romanian passengers and staff about paying for their drinks on board; noisy 'hoards' of gypsies which disturb staff and other passengers and so on. One of the forum participants went as far as to conclude that the reason why the price of the flight is so expensive is because AerLingus have probably had enough of Romanian passengers and they are trying to discourage their customers from using this flight and eventually closing down the route.

These reflections indicate how deeply the forum members are affected by having to share their citizenship with people whom they feel are not worthy to be claiming belonging to the same 'homeland' as them.

In a similar manner, forum members are trying to detach from the deeds of the Romanian criminals which tend to get over-representation in the foreign

media. Forum participants discuss extensively a so-called criminal nature ('culture') of Romanians: politicians steal, skilled people hack websites and engage in card skimming (which they think is a Romanian speciality), professional thieves steal cars (from Germany), the nation is famous for sex-trafficking, pick-pocketing, rape etc. They feel that Romanians abroad have already made a name for themselves in these sorts of illegal activities and this justifies to a certain degree the bad treatment of the whole community abroad.

> Let's be honest, what can the Italians do if Romanians behave like animals? Don't try to tell me that it is their civic duty as hosts to give the immigrants free food, free accommodation, free drinks and their women. (2007 – M02)

In many instances, Romanians on the forum have articulated a discourse emerging from a sense of inferiority about who they are and how they are treated. However some forum members acknowledge that in many situations Romanians tend to underestimate themselves and that perhaps they need to feel more positive about whom they are and struggle more to defend their sense of belonging:

> We are Romanians and we have to show everybody that we are not less capable than "the others" in any respect, and that we are a nation that knows what it wants. It's just that for so long the system has put its stamp on our way of thinking and everybody has taken advantage of us because of this. (2006 – F09)

Sometimes while striving to mask the inferiority complex Romanians online tend to adopt a completely opposite discourse and as a consequence construct a superior and arrogant one when discussing Romanians' identities as opposed to others: US vs. THEM. As one of the forum discussants remarks, Romanians usually oscillate between thinking that they are the smartest and thinking that they are the worst.

From the findings presented so far we can conclude that Romanianness understood as shared belonging in the great national discourse is not necessarily a treasured heritage. Being labelled as Romanian may have stigmatising effects, and while some Romanians may choose the path of assimilation into Irish society, others are striving to maintain their attachment to the homeland and to raise the profile of Romanianness by correcting the problematic aspects of the image that the Romanians have (or are thought to have) abroad. The following sub-section focuses on the forum members' views on what is probably the most contested category of Romanians: the politicians.

A particularly despised category of Romanians are the politicians. The main accusations made by the forum members in relation to the country's disastrous state are targeted at the government and the political sphere. Politicians are described as incompetent people that lack any moral values. Due to their lack of competence they are believed to be unable to negotiate efficiently and to represent the country's interests. Their lack of skills has been reflected, according to the forum participants, in the negotiations for Romania's EU membership when the politicians failed to obtain better terms for Romania (e.g. a better deal for Romania in the area of work rights). Moreover forum members bring to the forefront examples of several occasions when politicians have embarrassed Romanians living abroad: their lack of language skills renders them almost invisible in the European Parliament; lack of popularity and connections in Europe make the Romanian politicians isolated and unable to lobby and negotiate; etc.

In addition to their incompetence, politicians are also blamed for their lack of strength. Their humble attitude is thought to be the cause of weak lobbying activities carried out before Romania's EU accession and its subsequent effects: labour market restrictions etc. Some forum discussants argue that the politicians have been 'selling the country very cheap' (2006 – M14). The humble position continues in the view of the forum users long after Romania acquired its EU status, and this is exemplified by the lack of protests and negotiations when labour restrictions against Romanians and Bulgarians were renewed by many EU countries year after year. In their view, this can mainly be explained by the politicians' lack of a straight back bone:

> From the Romanian state (i.e. its representatives) one cannot expect any firm position and any actions taken from an equal position to the other members. Our politicians don't have the balls and we always prefer to stay with each leg in a different boat [Romanian popular metaphor for indecisiveness] and to keep our heads bent so that we do not bother anybody and we are just hoping that we will eventually obtain something [because we have a humble attitude] Obtain what? By staying like this the only thing we will obtain is a kick and a sharp pain in the arse. This is what we usually get (2008 – M02)

This is even more frustrating for some of the forum members since Romania has never pulled back from its obligations as a NATO or EU member:

> Our soldiers are dying in Iraq and Afghanistan and we are not able to get anything in negotiations. Let the Polish, the Hungarians, Lithuanians and Latvians go and defend the interests of UK and USA. We should retreat from those wars if we're not even able to get something in exchange for it. (2006 – M01)

Politicians have lost the trust of their electorate not only because of their alleged incapability, but also because the extensive corruption in which they are involved. Forum participants argue that politicians steal without remorse and their sole interest is to acquire more and more personal wealth and power rather that dealing with urgent public issues and concerns. These views stem from the extensive coverage in the Romanian newspapers of the intricate ties, corruption scandals and conflicts of interest between the politicians and the business world.

Politicians are considered responsible for the Romanians' image abroad. On the one hand Romanians in Ireland feel that politicians have played an active role in the shaping of the negative image through their lack of successful representation of the country abroad. On the other hand politicians are accused of not striving enough to shake off the stigma associated with the Romanian identity as it was created by Romanian criminals abroad. When faced with problematic issues, politicians are said to prefer to distance themselves from the negative aspects rather than tackling them. Last but not least, forum members find that funding for projects aimed at improving Romania's image (e.g. tourism) or the image of Romanian migrants (especially in the Irish environment) are non-existent.

> [Getting funding] seems like an utopia when you watch all the dirt that happens in the Romanian politics. We are in a Catch 22 and we all have to manage the situation in any way that we can. (2007 – M02)

In relation to the resources needed for cultural activities and promoting Romanian identity aboard, Romanian migrants also feel they lack the support from Romanian authorities. Thus, the onus tends to be placed on the role of non-governmental organisations and/or on migrants themselves to tackle these issues and promote a positive image of Romanian culture in Ireland.

Given all these circumstances discussed so far, it seemed almost natural to find out that diasporic Romanians feel that voting is almost a pointless exercise since politicians are not in touch with the needs of Romanians abroad. Forum participants also mentioned that they are disgusted with all political propaganda and all politicians, mainly due to the fact that political parties have

no doctrine and politicians are corrupt and incapable. Many feel disillusioned by the lack of choice and the invariability of the result.

> To go and vote? Vote for whom? Do you really think that there is any difference between the power and the opposition in our country, like it should be in any democratic society […] In Romania all of them are friends with each other and they steal equally […] I don't even want to hear about Romanian politics which I would define as: empty words, opportunism, greed, hypocrisy, delays, ignorance, corruption (2004 – F11).

> […] [For the diaspora the vote may mean many things] But the result we all know is only in the favour of "the smart boys" [the politicians] (2008 – M02)

This section has revealed some of the most problematic challenges that Romanians abroad (and in this case Romanians in Ireland) have identified in relation to the situation in their homeland and the main 'culprits' for these dramatic circumstances. The following section sets out to explore the things that make Romanians proud of their ancestral home.

From hate to love… - Romania and the things that make them proud

The third section of the chapter highlights the key aspects that make forum members feel proud about their country. It also focuses on their ideas of patriotism and respect for the country and their nostalgic feelings when thinking of their homeland.

In spite of the many aspects they dislike about their country of origin, Romanians are extremely proud of the beauty of their country and its landscapes. Seeing media representations (in films, ads, internet short clips etc.) which focus on Romania's beautiful sights and, moreover, reading or hearing the confessions of foreigners praising the country following their visits, these are aspects which make Romanians extremely proud.

Some see in tourism the only pride that they still have left. However, according to the Romanian diaspora in Ireland, tourism is usually left to its own devices because the government does not see it as a priority and hence is not interested in promoting it. To counter the lack of awareness of Romanian tourism, some forum participants tell stories of their own individual initiatives to promote their homeland: one forum member mentions buying and distributing Romanian guidebooks in her multicultural friendship network; other forum users

mentioned showing photos to their work colleagues and sharing information as much as possible with them about their country etc.

Besides the national scenery, Romanians are also proud of the human talents emerging from their homeland, namely mathematicians, IT engineers, experienced medical staff and so on. However several forum members contest these aspects and mention that to a great extent these ideas about 'our so-called talented people' represent nothing more than 'old myths' which are simply no longer true. Surprisingly, this criticism of the 'old myths' does not emerge from the sceptics of the forum (the ones that are pessimistic about the power to change the image of Romanians abroad), but rather from the ones who see a strong desire for a re-construction of Romanian identity and image from the foundational level.

Many names of famous Romanians have been mentioned in different contexts on the forum. It is particularly the case for those who have made an excellent reputation and are well-known abroad. Among the names mentioned are members of the Galway Ensemble - ConTempo Quartet (formed in 1995 by former students from the Music University in Bucharest)[48]; Herta Müller, the 2009 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature (A Romanian born German novelist, writing about the cruel realities of the Communist Regime in Romania)[49]; and Dacian Ciolos, the new European Commissioner for Agriculture. These achievements of some of the most famous Romanians make the forum members extremely proud. It is sometimes uncertain whether some of these well-know personalities consider themselves representatives of Romania or not (as may be the case for example of Herta Müller). Regardless of this, Romanians seem to take pride in the achievements of some personalities which belong to a liminal zone of Romanian culture.

Some Romanians in Ireland also feel that their cultural traditions make them proud and at the same time it also makes them feel distinct from 'the others' (referring in particular to the Irish). In particular the Christmas celebrations at home are unforgettable for many of the forum participants and for this particular reason they are nearly impossible to reproduce in exact detail in Ireland. The availability of an increasing range of ethnic food products may make it easier for Romanians to acquire a better 'taste of home', however the nostalgia with which they recall the family Christmas traditions back home makes it impossible to recast the same rituals in a foreign land.

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[48] Source http://www.galwayensemble.ie.
[49] Source http://en.wikipedia.org.

> Just like many of you I have paid a big price [to migrate]. I had a beautiful life at home even though I had to face some difficulties as well. It hurts the most during the holidays… here it will never be the same. The winter preparations, slaughtering the pig, our traditions, Christmas… (2004 – F03)

> I told them [Irish work colleagues] that we go singing Christmas carols from home to home through the village and we start with 2-3 families but then others join us as well and we end up gathering about 10-12 families around a rich Christmas meal and we truly feel that it is Christmas. And I felt that they are really envious when I told them how nice it was there… And they kept asking for more details and one of them was actually Google-ing for a holiday in Maramureș [...] (2007 – M13)

Other positive aspects that make Romanians proud of their national belonging are the language and culture. This represents a new vision that started to take shape on the forum in recent years. Romanians feel that while the country is still 'in a disgusting state', its culture and language are absolutely fascinating and they need to be promoted better.

> […] my mother language is magic, it is the language of my dreams, of my childhood, it is the connection with my friends and my family (2009 – F06)

The pride that Romanians feel about their language tends to be even greater when they encounter (personally or through media) examples of foreigners learning Romanian. This is the case for some of the spouses of Romanians living in Ireland, but also the case for many foreigners that have either taken a job, started businesses or bought land and emotionally settled in Romania.

Romania's cultural diversity is considered by the forum members as a great asset to their homeland and at the same time it is another aspect that makes them very proud. They feel that Romania's historical ethnic minorities (German, Hungarian, Turks and Tatars) have given the country a cosmopolitan flavour even before other Western European countries became cosmopolitan as a consequence of economic migrations and asylum. Recent migration to Romania (generally from the North and the East - Ukraine, China and Moldova) is however a new phenomenon that astonishes Romanian migrants: since Romanians have chosen to migrate because they found the living conditions in their country hard to tolerate, it seems almost unconceivable that others would actually choose Romania as a destination in their migratory project. Nonetheless, forum discussants mentioned that they would like to see more migration happening in Romania, but they express a strong preference for migration of a certain kind: fewer migrants from the east, more migrants from the

West. This may be interpreted as a reversal of the current East-to-West migration trend and, at the same time, seeing Occidental migrants in Romania as a confirmation of the country's value. Consequently this would greatly improve the level of trust in the country's bright future and would also bring The Romanian diaspora great pride in their country's appeal to 'the Others'.

Last but not least, some Romanians online mention that, as a nation, they should take great pride in their history, which, they feel, goes a very long way back, allowing them to track Romanians (or at least their ancestors) among the first peoples in Europe:

> We will join the EU, but it is improper to say that we become a part of 'Europe' now, because we were in Europe long before others. The Dacians [Romanians' direct ancestors] were not migrant people like the Gauls, the Germans, the Greek and the Celts […] (2004 – M01)

On the other hand, others argue that their history has never had a glorious historic past and perhaps Romanians should stop obsessing with their past. These more pessimistic views point out that Romania has always chosen the wrong strategic allies (e.g. in the World Wars) and therefore has always been at a loss.

Patriot games

There are many aspects that are valued by diasporic Romanians in relation to their homeland. This section highlights some of the key dimensions of the national pride discourse. However many forum users question whether these aspects are sufficient in order to make Romanians love their country.

In relation to the issue of patriotism (generally understood as attachment to and love of country), research findings have indicated so far that Romanians feel a certain degree of pride about their country, in spite of its alleged 'disastrous situation'. However in many instances forum participants have questioned whether patriotism is 'a thing of the past' (associated with the forced communist patriotic feelings) or an emergent sentiment in the case of the Romanian diaspora.

 Some argue that Romanians are not patriots at all since they refuse to associate with other Romanians or to participate in events organised by the Romanian Community. For these discussants, patriotism refers to a desire to

spend time with other co-citizens either by participating in collective events or by doing volunteer work for the Romanian Community organisations.

This is however a rather skewed measure of patriotic feelings, as other forum members tend to argue. Lack of interest in partaking in Romanian Community events may be linked to the problematic organisation of the events, rather than a contestation of the importance of getting together. Volunteer event organisers have limited access to professional advertisement channels (media; mailing lists etc.) therefore the announcements rarely reach more than a handful of fellow-citizens. Moreover the events organised rarely have a wide scope that caters for the interests of all Romanians in Ireland. The issue of social class becomes of key importance here as it highlights the fact that users may find their own way of expressing their patriotic feelings and attachment to the homeland, thus rendering some of the otherwise typical manifestations as 'kitsch'.

Moreover, the value of community work has been greatly eroded during communism when volunteer work was forced upon Romanians and was a key source of free labour.

Consequently, when discussing patriotic attitudes, several forum members felt that one should not try to identify patriotism, by relying on stereotypical indicators:

> In today's 21st century nobody could persuade me to sing the national hymn in public… and I don't think that this means I don't love my country. As well, nobody could convince me to listen to Romanian folk music on December 1st [the Romanian National Holiday] I don't like Romanian folk music […] because I am interested in other styles of music. (2006 – F02)

For other forum participants, the signs of patriotism lie in people's most common everyday acts. Being an honest person in a country where everybody is assumed to be immoral and corrupt is thus considered a sign of love and respect for the country:

> I worked like a slave back home and I paid my taxes. I paid hundreds of euro each month in taxes so that they [the government] have what to steal, they also repaired a few roads here and there and the rest they distributed to the unemployed […] (2006 – M18)

Last but not least forum members feel that patriotism is also reflected in the desire to return to Romania:

> I honestly don't see myself as living abroad all my life… From time to time I keep telling myself that this [Ireland] is just a borrowed home… but it's not "home". (2006 – F02)

This last paragraph highlights in a very interesting manner the fact that patriotism may eventually reveal itself not through standard manifestations, but rather in a more silent way by keeping Romania as the true home in their memories and by harbouring a deep respect and love for it in spite of its difficulties, in good and bad times, in 'sickness and in health'.

Coping with nostalgia

The love for their homeland is also identified in the nostalgia that forum participants feel towards their homeland. Nostalgia is sometimes revealed when thinking about particular foods (in particular linked with Christmas traditions); when listening to a particular sort of music:

> 'I want to cry, to cry and to cry one again and to wonder what [the hell] am I doing here?!! I want Irina & Fuego to sing me something about my mum... [...] Or Maria & Ionuț Ciobanu to sing: I was born near the Carpathians […] (2007 – M05).

In some cases nostalgia is unleashed when seeing Romania's landscape on TV (in promotional ads, documentaries or as filming locations). This creates a huge torment in some of the forum member's hearts, making them re-evaluate (even if just briefly) their decision to stay in Ireland or return 'home'.

When imagining their country in a nostalgic way, the bad memories seem to fade away and good ones take precedence:

> Let's remember when we left Romania the good-bye words we said to all our dear ones: "I'm sick of Romania. Here nothing happens and nothing can be done about it". Things change after a while and we start to forget the desperate situation that we had to face then and we think of Romania as the idyllic land of our childhood, the smell of Christmas cake, the sleigh rides, but apart from this the system still hasn't changed and unfortunately it is even worse than before. (2004 – M07)

In many situations, the mechanisms of nostalgia are complex. The following section extracted from one of the forum discussions (from 2006) is dedicated to the topic of nostalgia:

- For those of us born near our Carpathians; How do you survive this curse [referring to the curse of living away from the place of origin]? How long will we be able to take it? […] Will we ever see those dear to us standing or will we just see a big lock on the front door upon our return??? (M05)

- It is a weird feeling, when I was away from the country, I missed it, and now that I am back here [in Romania] for more than a year now, I am looking forward to leave it [...] I am 44 years old and I am the only daughter my parents have and now I see myself forced to leave them when they are so old [...] I have no other choice... But if you miss the country, come back for a short visit. You will get over your nostalgia. (F05)

- [...] In Ireland I get nostalgic about Romania, and when I come to Romania and I stay for a bit longer I start to miss Ireland. If I could bring here a few close relatives then for sure I will not need Romania at all […] (F13)

- 'The thing with the relatives is relative… […] The fact that you succeed abroad and you can send them a small amount that ensures their survival counts much more than being together but poor. Unfortunately one cannot have it all.' (F05)

Box 7.1. *About nostalgia (2006)*

Several interesting aspects emerge from this segment of conversation. For some of the Romanians in Ireland there is a strong attachment to their homeland as a beautiful geographic space that becomes personalised: '***our*** Carpathians' (emphasis added). On the other hand there is the strong link to the family left behind which makes the forum participants realise that migration has involved a huge sacrifice of family ties. Hence, migration seems to be like a curse for those that fell into the trap of nostalgia.

However for some of the forum discussants, nostalgia fades away when one thinks about the financial hardships back home and when one feels the burden of duty towards their family. In this circumstance, some Romanians talk about living abroad from home as a Catch 22 situation: in spite of missing one's country and the old life, one has a higher duty and therefore cannot return. Therefore happiness is forever incomplete.

Several users feel that nostalgia becomes even harder to deal with when the distance is longer. Many forum users argue that their desire to migrate within Europe rather than elsewhere (USA, Canada or even Australia) is generated by the lower cost (both the emotional and the financial cost) of the migratory process. This seems to be an indication that the European space is very important for Romanian migrants, acting just like an 'extended home', or a home away from home.

In conclusion, while there can be many negative aspects to highlight about their country and its people, Romanians in Ireland are also aware of the

many aspects that make them proud of their national belonging. It is expected that gradually all these positive elements will constitute the foundation of a more positive feeling of belonging to the national discourse and equally lessen the stigma and shame attached to being Romanian:

> The negative perception everyone has about Romanians and Romania could be changed in a few years' time as people changed their perceptions about the Irish too. Many people say now that it is cool to be Irish, especially Americans: they all want to have Irish roots. Even Obama is supposed to have some Irish roots. And us, Romanians, we can also show the world that it's cool to be Romanian. We should be proud with our country (2009 – F10)

The Irish example has been mentioned by many forum members as the ideal path that Romanians should follow in their quest to improve their feelings of being Romanian:

> I can see my boyfriend and how proud he is that he is Irish and then I look at me and notice the fact that I say I am Romanian only when prompted to say where I am from. And this hurts me immensely (2009 – F06)

Romanians in Ireland seem to have an intricate relation with their country and their co-citizens. This complex bond with their homeland unravels continuously through their discourse and it seems to resemble a puzzle with many different facets, some good, and some bad:

> For me there are two Romanias. One is written with capital 'R' and the other one is written with small caps 'r'. In the (R)omania (with capital letter) I include the Romanian university graduates , those people that work hard and are very appreciated in their workplaces and the communities they are part of. On the other hand we have the (r)omania (with no capital letter) that includes those that steal from ATMs and shops, those that beg on the streets, the bureaucracy that makes one waste their time […] and those Romanians that are not open to other opinions than their own (2007 – F07)

Consequently, it emerges that gypsies tend to be symbolically excluded from Romania that makes forum members proud. In exchange they are not even 'named', but rather identified *in absentia* by their so-called typical activities (begging and stealing) and they are discursively assigned to the 'stigmatic Romania' category

The arguments presented so far bring important clues to the process of discovering how Romanians in Ireland see their homeland. The interplay between 'love' and 'hate' seems to be the key aspect that frames their discourse about homeland. Moreover it emerged that in many instances forum members

adopt strategies to distance themselves from Romania and its people. The following section describes the key dimensions of the 'Us' vs. 'Them' discourse that Romanians in Ireland use when constructing their diasporic identities as distinct from the Romanian national identity.

Us and them – diaspora vs. homeland

So far this chapter has highlighted the main feelings displayed by Romanians in Ireland in their discourse about their homeland. The current section focuses on the identity discourses that the Romanian diaspora in Ireland constructs in relation to their ancestral home. It spells out the multiple differences between 'being Romanian' and 'being a member of the Romanian migrant community in Ireland': what does it mean to be 'one of us' versus 'one of them'.

To a great extent Romanians in Ireland still feel attached to their homeland. In several topics on the forum, members discuss about their 'messianic' duty towards the motherland. One of their greatest dilemmas is whether by migrating they have done the country a favour or have actually caused it damage.

Opinions are manifold: for some the true sacrifice would have been to stay behind and put their skills to work in the process of reconstruction of their homeland. Those who have already migrated could fulfil their duty towards the motherland by returning to Romania and using their experience (and resources) earned abroad to improve the situation in their homeland.

For others however, a migrants' first duty needs to be towards their families: by helping their family escape poverty or achieve a better standard of living, migrants will indirectly contribute to the welfare of their country.

For some Romanians in Ireland migration has proven to be the only strategy that enables them to help their country, even if 'from the distance'. For example, in the absence of lobbying agents, diaspora may take on an active role in defending the nation and its image. They have so far done so through lively forum debates (as was the case when Romania was accused of involvement in the CIA prisons scandal)[50], but also through organising protests (e.g. labour

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[50] The scandal began in 2006 when the Swiss newspaper *SonntagsBlick* reported that secret prisons had been established in the former military base Mihail Kogălniceanu in the southeast of the country. This emerged following the Swiss intelligence forces had intercepted a fax, which was

market restrictions), and, last but not least, through the personal example they set in their workplaces and their friendship networks. In short, by being model citizens abroad, diaspora feels that it contributes hugely to a change of image of their country of origin. Concurrently, this is also what Romanians in Romania expect from their fellow-citizens abroad:

> […] all those in Romania have high hopes from those of you who have lived and worked in the Occident. If not you, then who else [can raise Romania's profile]? And if not now, then when? (2006 – F05)

There are also several pessimistic opinions that any sacrifice for the country would be in vain as long as other things in Romania do not improve. In their view, fighting against 'the system' equals with certain demise. Hence their expectation is that the radical change in the Romanian situation is not the responsibility of those who have migrated, but rather a process that needs to originate from within the country:

> As for the fight against the system, I tried to do it […] but it seams easier to go with the flow than swim against the current. Let those with strong muscles swim against the current. But for the most of us we only risk getting drowned' (2004 – M16)

> I have always blamed those that migrated to Canada and did not want to stay to help Romania, but I have later understood that the system has pushed them out before it pushed me as well. Ever since I came here I am more patriot, more Christian, more honest, more altruistic and finally more Romanian than the majority of those living in Romania but who consider that are contributing more to its situation' (2004 – M07)

In this perspective we can see that some migrants prefer to be participants (but not necessarily the initiators) of a radical process of change in their homeland. Also it is interesting to note that the same users, in various moments may show a greater or a lesser commitment and involvement with the homeland.

The last quote also points to a key aspect of the 'diaspora vs. homeland' relationship. It highlights the fact that in many situations Romanians in Ireland adopt a tone of superiority when they talk about 'them [those living in Ireland]' vs. those at home: diasporic Romanians are more moral, more altruistic, and eventually more 'Romanian' than those at home[51].

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the first proof of the existence of secret US prisons in Europe. (Source: http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/dec2011/roma-d12.shtml)
[51] Online Romanians in Ireland also feel superior (intellectually and professionally) in relation to other Romanian diasporas. For example, the Romanian diasporic community in Italy is thought to be particularly low class. They are perceived to have a very low level of education and to originate

A similar line of argument has been noted repeatedly in many other forum discussions. For example, in several instances members indicate that those who remained in Romania have not yet 'woken up to reality' and they deserve suffering the effects of the disastrous situation there:

> Too bad that some cannot understand that they deserve a better life somewhere else. When they will realise this, the airports will be full. The problem is that some of them actually deserve what is happening to them and they deserve all the dirt the government throws at them just because they accept and tolerate this situation. And to think that I was wondering why Romania is like the 'circus of Europe' (2007 – M16).

Some members of the diaspora also feel superior because, in their view, they are key players in sustaining the economy through remittances, thus saving the country from collapsing:

> We, the emigrants are the engine of the Romanian economy (that is besides the three car manufacturers in Romania). Every time we go back we leave behind a few thousands Euro there. This is not to mention our long-term investments in properties back there […] And also the taxes we paid and we keep on paying to the embassy for different services. And the remittances… (2008 – M15)

This view is however not unanimously shared within the Romanian community in Ireland. Other forum members argue that remittances merely encourage consumption and inflation rather than actively propelling the country's economy. Nevertheless, these voices seem to represent only a minority among other forum views.

Diasporic Romanians also feel superior to the ones at home because they feel they can be more objective in analysing the political and economic realities from home, mainly due to the physical distance and alleged emotional detachment from the difficult realities. Moreover, they argue that because the diasporic public sphere is not as 'contaminated' as the national public sphere they are better (or at least different kind of) voters in the elections.

> Probably the most 'don't give a shit!' kind of voters you will find among those who left Romania, these voters after they had broken free from the harsh reality of the motherland, they became more and more indifferent (and for a good reason) towards the whole mess in the political world in Romania. So if you know of a method (other than the nuclear bomb) to change the mentalities of Romanians, I am willing to listen. I doubt it that this time [these elections] politicians will get away with empty words (2008 – M08).

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from poorer backgrounds/regions of the Romania. In addition, they are deemed to have the worst reputation both in relation to other diasporas in Italy and to other Romanian diasporas abroad.

What the above quote seems to highlight is that while diasporic Romanians seem to have become more detached from the bad situation at home, they have also learnt to distinguish the empty discourses of the politicians and hence they will not give their vote to unconvincing politicians. Moreover, several forum instances indicate that Romanians in Ireland also see themselves as more knowledgeable (because they have experienced the Romanian as well as the Occidental system and mindsets). Therefore they feel that they are entitled to develop a diagnosis of most problems and also to formulate solutions.

Forum members also feel that diasporas are better in keeping the Romanian language and culture alive, either by teaching their children Romanian as well as by setting a personal example when using the language correctly:

> We make a bigger effort [than those at home] to speak the language correctly […] I am pleasantly surprised that on the foreign forums, there is more emphasis on the correctedness than on the forums from Romania […] (2009 – M08)

Being extremely critical of media productions back home and also tremendously intrigued by the 'fake values' promoted in Romania, diasporic people feel that their responsibilities in maintaining the language and the Romanian culture alive are immense:

> Unfortunately in Romania one can hardly find a newspaper or a magazine in which the articles are not full of Romglish. I am not even going to discuss what one can see or hear on TV… Those living abroad really try hard not to forget the language, to speak it as correctly as possible while those at home only maim it' (2009 – F08)

> Because we are uprooted, we have the special task to keep into our vocabulary as many Romanian words as possible. Romglish is the danger that we have to face every step of the way. (2009 – M04)

In spite of the superior tone that some forum members adopt when talking about their homeland, there are also instances when they believe that if they are to fulfil any mission towards the motherland, they need to abandon the superiority discourse:

> When I hear people saying that 'it sucks' in Romania I simply wonder if they see there Romania as merely a holiday destination or the place where their parents, brothers and sisters etc. live. I think it is distasteful to show off our superiority towards those at home […] It's as if they couldn't feel how bad the situation is… We have moral obligations towards them… (2007 – F01)

Abandoned or self-isolated... painful engagements with the homeland

While on the one hand diaspora feels a sense of superiority towards the homeland, on the other they are experiencing rejection and feel abandoned by their country of origin. This becomes visible mainly in the discourses that Romanians in Ireland construct in relation to politicians.

In their view, Romanian politicians have abandoned those living abroad and left them to their own devices, to manage all by themselves challenging tasks such as integration, community building etc.

> '[…] leave your egos and your whims aside; you are on your own! Romanian politicians couldn't care less about you […] So go on, meet up over a pint of beer, or a game of soccer, talk, make brain-storming exercises and do whatever you know best… Only count on your own capabilities and resources (2006 – F05)

Forum members complain about the lack of funding for community projects (e.g. organising the National Holiday celebrations and other events aimed at maintaining cultural identity). They interpret the lack of financial support as rejection by the homeland, and this rejection becomes even more personal when other projects (developed at home or abroad) seem to benefit from funding:

> It hurts to see that even in Bucharest the money are spent on building monasteries and churches, on editing poetry books and magazines for old people, so boring that they put you to sleep […] when these money were initially assigned to us (2006 – M17).

> I went to the Conference of the Romanian Communities in Europe paying for my own personal expenses. It was one of the biggest political lies. There were all three comrades [names] secretaries of state, about 10-15 clergyman from Europe […] and they only told us lies […] they looked bored […] they have spent the budget on organising this pointless conference and they were happy […] And when I asked them a clear question I was not given a clear answer […] (2006 – M03)

Moreover, it is thought that any attempts (by Romanians in Ireland) to address these issues have so far been disregarded: funding applications have been unsuccessful; lobbying Romanian politicians visiting Ireland resulted in promises which were eventually not kept etc. Hence the online diaspora points out that they feel they are taken advantage of while getting nothing in exchange:

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[…] they care about us only as long as we send money home so that they can steal from our families and fill their bellies and they only remember that we exist near the elections (2007 – M01).

Even more importantly, Romanians in Ireland feel that the government does not understand their needs. For example, some forum members recall how inappropriate they felt when as a response to the problematic Romanian image abroad (i.e. all Romanians being mistaken for gypsies) the Romanian government has responded by financing a concert by Damian brothers (an internationally renown gypsy band). In the forum members' views, this was a tremendous mistake and only added insult to injury.

Members of the Romanian diaspora in Ireland also felt insulted and rejected when rumours emerged about a new governmental initiative to test all migrants returning 'home' after having spent more than 6 months abroad for AIDS (2007).

In relation to the embassy, many Romanians in Ireland complained about quality of service and argued that the public officers show contempt for all those requesting embassy assistance. In addition to this, the embassy is viewed as completely isolated from the community of Romanians in Ireland: Romanian migrants rarely get invited to participate in events organised by the embassy and the embassy does not participate in the events organised by Romanians in Ireland. As one of the forum member highlights, there is the still an unsolved dilemma of whether the Romanian Embassy in Dublin represents the government of Romania or Romanians in Ireland.

There seems however to be an improvement in recent years in the relationship between the embassy and Romanians in Ireland, and this is mainly due to the active involvement of the new Consul on the forum.

Examples provided so far have referred to the humiliation and rejection that many forum discussants feel in relation to the Romanian government and politicians. Other instances highlight the fact that Romanians online feel insulted and rejected by the mass media in Romania who usually treat them as strawberry-pickers ['capşunari'].

Forum members also see the refusal of many Romanian artists to perform concerts for the diaspora as a sign of rejection by the homeland. On the one hand Romanians in Ireland agree that for many artists touring abroad may be difficult and it may significantly disrupt their concert agendas. On the other hand, they feel that artists are mocking the diaspora by asking incredibly high

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prices in order to make sure that the diaspora cannot afford to pay such amounts and, therefore, they would not bother them again.

One last example of the perceived rejection from the homeland is provided by the forum members immediately after the 2009 general elections in Romania. Public opinion in Romania has held the Romanian diaspora responsible for tilting the balance in favour of a candidate who was not so popular within the borders of Romania. Their assumed power to change the voting result has made some of the forum members very proud and they argue that this is the sweet diasporic revenge for their exclusion from the homeland.

On the other hand, other forum participants point out that the so-called 'decisive diasporic vote' is nothing but a myth as the voting result can only mean that a majority voted in a certain direction. Therefore the statistics emerging from breaking down the voters according to different categories are irrelevant. It is their feeling that mass media are the main culprit for these problems because, in their search for the sensational, they are always using diaspora as a scapegoat in order to create hatred between Romanians and to turn them one against the other.

Findings so far indicate that although sometimes the diaspora feels superior to the ones still living in Romania, in other cases they feel completely isolated and rejected by the homeland. A third type of response has been encountered by carefully analysing the online forum discussions. A number of voices mentioned that in certain circumstances they have chosen to isolate themselves from the realities of their country of origin.

The live image of a country's disastrous situation is in stark contrast to the love they nurture for it. In this situation, many forum members have chosen to isolate themselves from the sad realities back home.

> I am so sick of Romania when I read these articles [about corruption], whether they are true or not I don't even care but it's clear that the truth is somewhere in the middle' (2009 – M06)

This strategy allows them to ignore the negative aspect and to carry on loving and respecting an imagined homeland which their nostalgic memory helps create.

This type of attitude is also linked to feeling powerless to change anything about the country. While some of the forum users mentioned that they sometimes feel like denying Romania as their homeland, in other instances the same participants express their love for their ancestral home:

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> Romania for me has become yet another exotic destination. They should keep it to themselves (2009 – M08).

> We feel as strangers here as we do not resonate with the behaviours we see around us […] (2009 – F14)

The findings presented in this section indicate that the relation Romanians in Ireland develop with their country of origin may take very intricate forms blending together elements of hate as well as love, of inclusion and participation as well as rejection and self-isolation.

Discussion and conclusions

This chapter highlighted the great variety of discourses that online Romanians in Ireland constructed when talking about their homeland and their fellow-citizens. Mapping the discourses on the online forum brought to the forefront the multiple ways in which the Romanian community in Ireland imagine and re-imagine their motherland. The task to look at Romanian narratives of home and belonging was exciting, as it surfaced both raised as well as many unexpected issues.

Findings pointed out that the homeland is very important in the lives of online Romanians, both as a geographical space (which, in their view, needs to be clearly differentiated from the people inhabiting it), and as a symbolic space that is constructed in the national and diasporic imaginary. The symbolic nature of the borders that delimit a nation was previously discussed by other scholars, for example, Anderson (1996), Hepp (2004), Triandafillydou and Wodak (2003).

The fact that 'the national' is still important for Romanians in Ireland confirms that 'old' national identities and feelings of belonging do not simply fade away in order to be replaced by 'new' identities (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992; Basch et al., 1994; Elkins, 1997; Fludernik, 2003). As a result, diasporic identities are deeply anchored in transnational spaces, linking the old and the new identities, the homeland and host country(ies).

Confirming existing theories, the 'homeland' represented for the forum members a common point of identification and a common pool of cultural values, memories, myths and symbols (Safran, 1991; Parekh, 2008) that played a key role in shaping their feelings of belonging. Similar to the Kurdish elite analysed by Hylland Eriksen (2006) or the Chinese community studied by Brenda Chan (2005), Romanians in Ireland imagined their homeland online, by bringing forward their shared memories, experiences and symbols, as well as their visions of the future.

However, Romanians in Ireland often used their country of origin as a negative referent: corruption, bureaucracy, dirt, bad infrastructure, poverty etc. constitute the main reasons for hating the country and they tend to overlap to a great extent with the main factors that determine outward migration, namely low wages, economic vulnerability, bureaucracy, corruption and other frustrations associated with the homeland (ANBCC, 2005; Sandu, 2006).

This negative image of the home became even more accentuated upon return from abroad. The confrontation between the 'real' and the imagined

country often led to feelings of disappointment among Romanians online. This particular issue is in agreement with Andits' (2010) findings in relation to the Hungarian diaspora and also with Allende's (2007 [2003]) personal experiences as an émigré.

The effects of this negative image of the homeland on their ethnic and diasporic identity were, according to Romanians online, very stigmatising, thus leading to shame and a desire to isolate themselves from 'other' Romanians perceived to bear the blame for the negative label attached to Romanianness. While several scholars among whom Jenkins (1997) and Goffman 1990 [1963] have discussed the concept of stigma associated to particular ethnic identities, there is still a dearth of studies of these issues.

These findings concur with Morley (2001) and Parekh (2008) who both highlight the idea that migrants' self-respect is often inseparable from the respect for their country' (Parekh, 2008, p.57) and also explain why, in spite of the negative discourse towards it, the homeland is defended when attacked by the 'others' (Skinner,1993).

It also emerged from research findings that the Romanian online diaspora often claimed that their fellow-nationals living in the homeland (especially the Romanian politicians) were among the ones which gave the country its negative image. This artifice allowed forum members to shift between the two apparently opposing discourses in relation to their ancestral home: Romania as 'the land of all problems' vs. Romania as 'their beloved home' which cannot be accused of any wrongs, and deserves to be loved and respected. This seems to confirm Morley's (2001) definition of the homeland as a symbolic idea (the Heimat), a space of belonging, rather than a geographical location.

What could be noticed thus was a double-voiced discourse of home (Bakhtin's, 1981 cited in Andits, 2010; but also Klimt, 2010; Devlin Trew, 2010; Parekh, 2008) as Romanians seem to alternate discourses of love and hate, shame and pride in relation to their motherland. Hence, research findings pointed to a very complex relation that Romanians developed in relation to their home.

Romanians get involved in the issues surrounding their motherland (through media consumption, voting, debating the main issues, lobbying etc.). Parekh (2008) argues that all these actions, regardless of whether they make diasporic people feel angry or proud, reveal forms of involvement with their country of origin and contribute to strengthening and reaffirming their national identity (p.57).

While online Romanians were nevertheless proud of some aspects of their country of origin, the predominant discourse on the forum seemed to be centred on the stigma they feel in relation to who they are and where they come from. At the same time, while they were nostalgic about some aspects, this feeling was often effortlessly dismissed from their diasporic hearts by reverting back to a contemplation of the difficulties and realities back home or the duty (financial and moral) to their families. In addition to this, ethnic consumption and involvement with diasporic institutions also constitute for forum members a 'cure' for nostalgia in a similar manner as suggested by several other studies (Greve and Salaf, 2005; Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; Georgiou, 2006; Doland and McDonagh, 2000).

It could also be noted from forum data that, at times, Romanians in Ireland have expressed a feeling of superiority towards their co-nationals still living in the homeland. The online diaspora argued that they are able to maintain national culture (referring in particular to language, traditions and even cultural taste) in a pure, authentic form. Other authors (Shi, 2005; Georgiou, 2001; Andits, 2010) indicated similar trends. However, in other instances, Romanians in Ireland felt neglected by the motherland, whose symbolic duty is to love all its children, even the estranged ones.

In spite of the tumultuous relation with their ancestral home, all findings seemed to point to the fact that Romanian diasporic interest in the homeland and their emotionally charged discourse reflect the attachment that Romanians in Ireland tend to harbour towards their motherland and this reaffirms their national belonging.

Data collected over a period of more that six years, indicated that migrants' relation to home is not frozen in time, but rather the location and meaning of 'homeland' are constantly being renegotiated (Hall, 1990a). A similar finding was encountered by Popov (2010) in his research on the former-Soviet Greek returnees. This enables us to understand that diaspora's relation to home is not a given, or an 'inheritance', but rather a process of active negotiation and contestation.

In conclusion, there seems to be a significant link between the narratives of hate for their homeland and a negative image about their identities as Romanians. The opposite was also noticed as feelings of pride led to positive images about 'being Romanian' (or hope that in the future 'Romanianness will be cool') and about 'being diasporic' (as opposed to being a Romanian in Romania).

Chapter 8 - When the honeymoon is over... scrutinising diasporic attitudes towards their hosts

Overview of the chapter

The chapter sets out to map Romanians' online discourses about Ireland and the Irish. The title of the chapter divulges the fact that the dynamics of the relation between Romanians on the forum and the host country resembles, to a certain extent, stages and 'milestones' of a sentimental relationship.

The chapter aims to explore whether Romanians feel included in or excluded from the Irish economic, political, social and cultural spheres; to comprehend their views on the process of integration in the host country; to identify the main challenges in achieving their desired goals for integration; and, finally, to highlight how these aspects reflect and impact on their collective identity constructions.

The first section presents a rich description of how forum members portray Ireland and the Irish. It provides an account of the main challenges experienced by online Romanians in Ireland, focusing on economic and legal difficulties as well as on the forum users' experiences of discrimination and racism at the governmental, institutional or societal/personal level. The section highlights the fact that the opinions shared by online Romanians in respect to the host country and its citizens can rarely be categorised as 'entirely negative' or 'entirely positive' and that, the majority of forum postings seems to expose a double-voiced discourse about the host country and the natives. The impact of these numerous challenges to the process of diasporic identity construction is also discussed.

The final section of the chapter gives an overview of the forum participants' opinions of successful integration, as well as their strategies to achieve integration.

8.1 Getting to know each other: Ireland and the Irish in the Romanian narratives

A bit like us, yet different – Irish vs. Romanians

In general, there seems to be a rich mix of opinions expressed on the forum about the Irish, thus both negative and positive characteristics emerge from the analysis of data.

Some online users portray the Irish as ignorant, and others mention that they show no interest in education, particularly in the field of exact sciences[52]. Thus, forum members conclude that Ireland needs 'specialists' and good foreign managers in order to keep the economy prosperous or, post-recession, to keep it alive. Particularly following Romania's entry into the EU on January 1st 2007, these views come up even stronger than before in the forum discussions as Romanians now find themselves in fierce competition with the natives in a labour market already affected by recession.

Moreover, there are also some participants who point out another negative characteristic of the Irish and that refers to the fact that they drink a lot. It is argued by some that Irish are "the beer champions" (M01, 2004) or, metaphorically speaking, that "they have the recipe for drunkenness" (M02, 2007 and 2009).

In some cases, the two above-mentioned negative characteristics are associated in the same description in order to give an even more powerful illustration of why 'hard-working' migrants are better able to get the job done.

In several instances during the forum discussions it emerged that users view the Irish as lazy, referring to the fact that they like 'quiet' jobs (M41, 2004) and that they "live by the rule that if something (that needs to be done) can be postponed until tomorrow, then they will definitely do it tomorrow" (M04, 2004). On a humorous note, one of the users uses the expression 'the Celtic snail' to refer to the Irish institutions' slow processing of files and applications of various kinds (M02, 2007). Several forum participants also call Ireland the country of

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[52] Hinting at the low level of results in Math Leaving Cert Exam, an aspect that was presented by media from 2008 onwards.

'taking it easy' thus leading them to conclude that "We've migrated from the land of 'never mind, it's good enough'[53] to the country of 'take it easy'" (M23, 2008).

These above-mentioned arguments seem to play an important role in a discourse aimed at justifying migrants' presence in the host country and their utility for the economy. Romanians desire to feel needed in their new country and to justify their role as contributors to the society:

> We integrated into a society that needed us [...] It is yet an imperfect society but this is why we all found a warm spot in it. If the society would have been more settled, then we would have only had jobs in agriculture for years (M19, 2006).

Another negative aspect mentioned on the forum is the high level of criminality among the Irish population which many users see as problematic, referring in particular to drug trafficking and its consumption, but also to abuses of the welfare system. This issue is important as findings presented in Chapter 7 point to the fact that Romanians too see themselves as 'a nation of criminals' (or at least this is what they argue to be their emblematic portrayal in the media). However, in the view of the forum members, Romanians' criminal acts typically involve other types of offences, including (petty) thefts, human trafficking and card skimming - the latter being their speciality.

An alleged Irish 'obsession' with property is also mentioned in the forum discussions and one of the users argues that this reflects an inferiority complex generated by the poverty in which the Irish were living until recently (M01, 2007). It is however at the same time acknowledged by some members that Romanians tend to express a similar behaviour in relation to property.

According to online Romanians, Irish culture and origins also display many similarities to Romanians'. For example, one user of the forum notes that both Irish and Romanians have a strong history of farming (F01, 2009), thus hinting at the similar process of modernisation which both countries had to/have to undergo. Another user highlights the common cultural roots of the two nations, by pointing out that Dacians (Romania's ancestors) and the Celts are very close in language and traditions[54] (M01, 2006).

Thus, findings presented so far seem to indicate that, on the one hand, online Romanians insist on the complementarity between their skills and characteristics and those of the Irish and this constitutes their trump in the competition for opportunities. On the other hand, they highlight the many

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[53] Referring to the Romanian expression "Las' că merge și-așa" which points to the fact that the quality always comes second to indolence.
[54] This aspect has been documented by various archaeological sources

similarities between 'us' and 'them' and this helps forum users experience a sort of 'cultural' closeness to the Irish who are described in somewhat comparable (even if negative) terms with those used by online Romanians to define themselves.

It is also interesting to take note of the fact that, regardless of any negative comments made about the Irish on the forum, online Romanians seem to always defend them against the 'ever-complaining' newcomers:

> My friend, if you have met a stupid Irish it doesn't mean that they are all stupid. I say you should be more careful with what you are saying because you cannot judge an entire nation (especially after only 2 months of staying here) […] after all it is only a matter of personal choice. If all Irish seem idiots to you then you can as well go back where you came from because they haven't requested your presence here [in Ireland] (M08, 2006).

One important aspect emerging from the analysis is that very few forum participants are entirely critical (or, on the contrary, praising) towards the Irish. Thus, there is often a mix of good and bad evaluations in the characterisations made by members on various occasions on the forum. For example one user mentions that:

> they are among the first in the world for suicide, they are beer drinking champions… however they don't put ashes on their head[55] and they have that thing that we miss – PRIDE (M01, 2004)

The Irish are thus viewed by online Romanians as a proud nation and also as a nation that stays united in order to face any difficulty. They are perceived to be more nationalistic than Romanians are, and, from this point of view, several forum users feel that the Irish are more helpful towards each other in the diasporic context, and that they love their country more than Romanians do theirs. Moreover, as one user highlights, it is admirable that in some pubs, before closing-time, the national anthem is the last song played and everybody stands up during this moment. While there are also voices on the forum arguing that the Irish are not necessarily more 'united' or nationalistic that Romanians (at least in reference to the diasporic groups), they seem to be a minority[56].

The Irish are also admired for being more generous than Romanians (F23, 2008; M03, 2006), both in relation to money (as they are seen to make lots of donations to charities) as well as their time (in some of the forum members'

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[55] This refers to a Romanian saying: "putting ashes on your head" means that you are covering yourself in blame and shame.
[56] These users are usually the same ones that argue against any generalisations made in relation to any particular nation or country. However, their position is not constantly neutral throughout all of their postings on the forum.

views, the Irish are committed to volunteer work, while Romanians completely disregard this type of activity).

Other users on the forum also mentioned that the Irish should stand as an example for them due to their level of civilisation, an attribute that Romanians allegedly lack. While it is not clearly pointed out what forum users mean when they refer to the 'level of civilisation', it appears from the connotations embedded in the forum discussion threads that they are actually referring to 'civility'. However one user feels that Irish were not born more civilised than us, and that they became so (M03, 2006). Hence, this highlights the argument that not all hope is lost for Romanians and that there is room for them to change for the better in this respect.

As it emerges from the previously presented findings, these characteristics (namely civic spirit, civility, national pride and the perceived national unity of the Irish) constitute precisely the things that forum members feel that Romanians generally lack. Furthermore, forum users alternate between using their constructed ideal-type of the Irish as a model that inspires Romanians in their effort to liberate themselves from the stigma attached to their identity, while, at other times, it disheartens them as it comes into stark dissonance with the Romanian deeply embedded sense of inferiority and their alleged individualistic orientations.

In conclusion, while the Irish are attributed several negative characteristics, this does not mean that forum users can be split categorically between those who like the Irish and those who don't. Hence, findings presented so far highlight the fact that Romanians adopt a double-voiced discourse about the Irish, one that includes a mix between likes and dislikes, positives and negatives, just as they do in their characterisations of 'being Romanian'.

Ireland as a country of destination

Evidence from the forum shows that, in some cases, little is known about Ireland before the actual migratory journey. At other times, the knowledge tends to be stereotypical: Ireland is pictured as 'The Green Island' (pointing to the idea that Ireland is an ecologically oriented country) or, perceived as a country marked by violence (probably due to the associations that people make with the IRA):

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> Everybody at home tells me that if I move to Dublin I need to get used to the lie-down position when I hear shooting or explosions… and things like this (M29, 2006).

A brief look at the main reasons why Romanians online have chosen Ireland as their destination, shows us that few forum participants specifically wanted to migrate to Ireland and that, for many others, their arrival in Ireland was just a matter of taking advantage of an unexpected opportunity.

> 'I guess that there are few that actually chose this country. Many have settled wherever they got a chance to. 11 years ago I had no choice. I've been everywhere before coming here: Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, UK and then Ireland (in this particular order) and I have settled here because this is where the continent ended. I thought that they are warmer than the others. They were not racists and I don't think that they are racist now either (M21, 2006).

There are also users of the forum who argue that an important factor in their case was the use of the English language in Ireland. However, this does not represent the decisive element in their decisions mainly because Ireland is not the only country in the world where English is an official language.

This previous citation indicates that while the decision to come to Ireland was not necessarily intended or planned beforehand, their desire to stay is closely linked to the positive perceptions that Romanians have about Ireland and the Irish.

Moreover, many of the settled migrants are of the opinion that Ireland was not, for them, 'love at first sight'. In exchange, they argue that Ireland is a country that 'grows on you'. Therefore, just like a sentimental relationship, it develops over time and it requires nurturing:

> […] perception about Ireland changed in time, for example in the first year [I though that] the weather was awful, now, after 6 years it's "not so bad"; In the first year we felt that Irish are all stupid because we simply did not meet so many of them, but after that we saw that they also have smart people; I used to complain that PCs are expensive here […] but nobody notices that you can actually buy one computer with a weeks' pay, and that even if car insurance costs a fortune you have no problems to get the expenses back if you have an accident. Those who just came here have the tendency to accentuate the negative aspects and completely leave out the positive ones, and, at the same time, they become nervous and stuff if somebody criticises Romania in the newspapers (M08, 2004).

Regardless of the reasons behind their decision to migrate here, Ireland appears to generate mostly positive feelings among the forum members and this

constitutes the main reason why many continued to stay in Ireland even if, in come cases, they have achieved and even excelled their initial goals.

Ireland before 2007 - Opportunities and 'costs'

Just like as the characterisations constructed by online Romanians in relation to the Irish, descriptions of Ireland incorporate a mixture of positive as well as negative features.

At the first glance, only a small degree of 'criticism' of Ireland emerges from the forum and it usually refers to aspects such as the weather, the high prices or the inadequate transport network. Several forum discussions also include references to the Irish medical system, which some users tend to rate as even worse than the one back home; this seems to explain why many Romanians still travel home to access medical treatment, especially for diagnostics, rather than price.

The Irish educational system, both at the primary level as well as the third level, also gets its fair share of criticism from some of the forum participants. While this aspect may indicate a desire on the part of the migrants to restore their pride in their nation, praising the Romanian educational system which allegedly produces outstanding results, may also serve as a justification for a range of personal decisions, e.g. leaving their child/ children at home

> For as long as I have been living here I have worked in schools, in the middle of pupils, I see them in the take-away shop in front of my office, on the street and then when they grow up they will end up in pubs, at concerts and even in the news bulletins on TV and radio. If a Romanian school will open in Publin[57] so that they can study Romanian history and Romanian language and literature, Romanian geography etc. then I will enrol my kid there (M40, 2007).

However, in spite of these aspects mentioned above, Ireland was (before the onset of recession) perceived by most online Romanians as the land of opportunities.

> He who came to Ireland wanting to make something good has succeeded. Even those that came with other thoughts in mind have succeeded. There is enough room here for everybody and there is also room for those who want to come from now on (M03, 2006).

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[57] Hinting at the Irish so-called drinking culture.

Some users see Ireland as much better than other countries, including for example the UK, Italy, Spain just to name a few.

> […] what happened in Ireland from an economic point of view is unique and that is why I believe Romanians should thank the Irish for giving them a chance that no other country could give them. A friend of mine who is an English language teacher and who lived in Italy before coming to Ireland was shocked by the opportunities here. He mentioned that in Italy if you were working as a cleaner in Fiat you were so popular that you could give autographs to other Romanians. […] Here everybody could do whatever they dreamt of. [...] Our frustrations and personal failures are easy to blame on Ireland and we all do it as some point or another, but the problem is when we consider ourselves as the only responsible for our success, without giving the credit also to Ireland who gave us a hand in order to succeed. I cannot say the same thing about Romania unfortunately (M07, 2004)

The last fragment of the previous citation highlights an important issue in relation to the gratitude that many of the forum users feel towards Ireland and the Irish for allowing them to realise their potential.

> We have to admit that Ireland is the land of all opportunities (for those who have a legal status). People could make money, get re-qualifications, study, provide for children, buy houses here and in Romania, spend holidays here and abroad, learn the language […] which you can use anywhere in the world […] (M19, 2006)

It is thus hinted that these opportunities are not unconditionally available to everybody. To a great extent, they tend to be conditioned by possessing legal status in Ireland: "I have huge opportunities here, but I will be able to valorise them once I get my residence permit" (M16, 2004).

Also for some Romanian migrants these opportunities may come at a very high price. For example, one of the forum users indicates that getting accepted on the labour market and in Irish society generally requires one to partly deny his/her identity

> [If this country was so great in providing opportunities] then we would not have to hide behind non-Romanian papers and we would not be forced to work in the black economy. Ireland does indeed have opportunities but, in many cases, in order to benefit from them one has to give up their own identities and I will never be able to make such a huge compromise because there are many other countries where you can go and work without having to hide where you come from (F15, 2004).

This user refers to the situations when Romanians chose to work on fake passports (e.g. Italian, Portuguese etc.) in order to by-pass the visa and work permit restrictions. This aspect thus considerably constrained their identity choices, as they had to almost forcefully assume the fake identity in order to

avoid giving away their true identity (and risk being deported). Furthermore these situations have also limited their freedom to participate in the collective construction and performance of Romanianness.

Another dramatic price that one might have to pay refers to separation from the family, in particular children. This sometimes negative consequence of the visas and work permit system has placed several Romanians in a situation partly resembling 'Sophie's Choice': for example, one forum participant mentioned having to choose between her child born in Ireland and the other child born in Romania who could not join them in Ireland due to the uncertain legal status of the parents (who were expecting their permanent residence permit on the basis of IBC legislation).

It emerges thus that, before joining the European Union, Romanian migrants had encountered a set of challenges which they had to overcome in order to benefit of the context of opportunities offered by Ireland. Difficulties and delays experienced in the process of obtaining visas for family visits and family reunifications are among the most encountered aspects in the forum discussions. Moreover, humiliations in renewing their visas are also mentioned by several forum members and, according to them, this comes into stark contrast to the freedom which Irish citizens have to travel without a visa to Romania. Going even further, there are forum participants who point out that even in situations when a valid travel, residence or work visa was obtained, they were not spared questionings, discrimination and implicit humiliations at the customs checks, both in Ireland as well as in other countries where their connecting flights were boarding.

There is evidence on the forum that these experiences impact negatively on Romanians' diasporic identity constructions. They feel that the negative media representations of Romanians now begin to infuse into the social and institutional attitudes, thus becoming more real for forum members as they occasionally experience the effects, namely the perceived humiliations and the stigma associated with being Romanian.

Apart from the visa related issues, in the case of those members of the Romanian diasporic community that were residing illegally in Ireland, the main concern was related to deportations. To a great extent the relatively high risks assumed in order to remain illegally in Ireland reveal the strong pressure to succeed in their migratory adventures and to avoid a shameful return to the homeland.

In relation to the labour market, several interesting aspects are mentioned by forum users in connection with the difficulties experienced in accessing various job opportunities. On the one hand, before Romania joined the EU, the lack of recognition of qualifications was identified as a problematic aspect by many forum participants. This represents a significant challenge not solely for new migrants, but for settled migrants alike as they may not be able to progress in their careers and access jobs corresponding to their skills and academic qualifications.

> […] they try to defend their positions in front of immigrants that are better prepared than they are; they were very poor before and were lucky with the EU. Until 20 years ago when God blessed them and Europe has put money in their pockets… they were pitiful. Some of them were shepherds, others fishermen, others were working in agriculture and were leading their lives among sheep shit, or among the mud of the potato cultures. And now.... all you educated boys and girls come here to illuminate them?!? No can do! So get your trowels and your buckets and get on the scaffolds boys! Heads up but make sure you don't get mortar in your eyes' (M09, 2004).

This citation points to the fact that frustrations and disappointments (of having to work below one's level of qualification) tend to build up over time and lead to very acerbic critiques of the process of recognition of qualifications and its implications for the range of available job opportunities.

On the other hand, apart from difficulties related to the recognition of qualifications, forum members also mention examples of discrimination in the workplace including, among others, higher demands made by employers from their foreign employees; pay discrimination[58] and, last but not least, being fired or being refused employment solely on the basis of being foreign. Another significant issue relates to work exploitation, as several forum members describe their experiences of working overtime and not being paid accordingly.

One interesting fact emerges at this stage and that refers to the fact that, in some cases, even in the professional environment, discrimination may appear in the form of a 'glass ceiling'

> [...] in my previous job we were like 40% foreigners, from all over the world, so nobody would raise the question of racism there. The only aspect that gave me some thinking was that all managers were Irish and no foreigner got a promotion in the management ranks [...] But I would not consider this racism because nobody was holding us there captive (M08, 2008 –

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[58] One user mentions that the same job advertisement posted on an Irish and onto a Romanian site indicated a difference of 10k less per year in favour of the former (M48, 2007).

however the citation refers to a previous job held by the forum user before 2007).

Nevertheless, in spite of all these difficulties, most forum users seem to praise (pre-recession) Ireland for presenting Romanians with significant job and career opportunities. Moreover, according to them, Ireland enables Romanians to develop themselves not just in relation to their careers but also in relation to their personality.

> Financially speaking, the majority of my and my wife's colleagues are very well off – they are solicitors, businessmen with villas and holiday homes, but I am 100 times happier here in Ireland because I can be a moral person and I can succeed in life on my own, not with the help of the system meaning bribe, or relations of influence (M07, 2004)

Apart from this, Ireland is also praised for providing a stress-free environment where they can develop themselves. Thus, while according to several online Romanians, in their homeland they were constantly living in fear of economic hardships (for example, new tax increases, loss of job, devaluation of the national currency), in Ireland the stress levels are considerably lower and related to less significant areas of life (e.g. the bus/train is late and crowded).

Data collected indicates that most forum users feel that for them Ireland is "the land of opportunities". To a great extent this is the case for those Romanians who arrived in Ireland with a work contract or a job offer. The majority of others had to use alternative means in order to take advantage of what Ireland had to offer. Consequently, some online Romanians were working on fake identity papers; others (especially young families) have benefited from the IBC legislation (which grants them residence permits and the right to work following the birth of their child in Ireland); others have even taken up work illegally (i.e. without a work permit)[59].

It is interesting to note that for some forum users, both the IBC and the ability to work without a valid work permit constitute 'doors' which have intentionally been left open for migrants by the Irish government and employers. Thus, most of the forum participants perceive these as chances given to them by the Irish because they are good workers and also because (pre-recession) Ireland needs migrants:

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[59] This was possible, for many Romanians in Ireland, due to the fact that a social security number (a.k.a. PPS number) can be obtained even without proof of a valid work permit. Given the fact that all the other members of the EU only require a PPS number in order to work in Ireland, some Romanians have taken advantage of this confusion. There are also cases however when some of the forum members were confused themselves about this aspect and they found out from the other forum users that, to their surprise, they have been working illegally in Ireland.

> If they would have checked all the immigrants in detail, many Eastern Europeans and Chinese etc. would have been sent back home already. But in order to sustain the economic growth they pretend not to see the problems (M16, 2004).

For others, the strategy was to "start from the bottom" and accept any job (regardless of the level of qualification required or the level of pay) as long as it meant that they could stay in Ireland and earn money, in the hope that soon their qualifications would be recognised and they would get a job corresponding to their true skills and qualifications

> […] here, like all Romanians we started from the bottom, but in one year we had jobs that in Romania we could have only dreamt of and this is not only because of us, but because of the Irish system that allowed us to integrate (M07, 2004).

However, in the more recent years, other forum members tend to think that this type of strategy is just a symptom of the lack of confidence in one's capabilities (F22, F20, 2009). This shift can be explained by the fact that now Romanians (especially for the highly qualified) have a much greater flexibility to work in many other European countries and thus the pressure to succeed in one particular country may not be so strong.

Nonetheless, for many forum participants who arrived in Ireland before Romania joined the European Union, their determination to succeed implied, to a certain extent, turning a blind eye to all above-mentioned difficulties and to "keep going"

> This is just the beginning of humiliations. But I assure you that you will succeed and you won't feel sorry for the decisions that you made. I know plenty of Romanians that have caved in psychologically speaking and they have returned to Romania. But they have managed to stay there only for 6 months. For some of them it was too late to return legally to Ireland and then they returned illegally. So the point is that you have to grit your teeth, cuss in your beard or on the forum, but don't give up (M01, 2006).

In conclusion, while most forum members recognised the opportunities available to them in Ireland before the onset of recession, for some, taking advantage of these chances implied a series of additional efforts, strategies and, more importantly, costs (not solely of a financial nature). Moreover, it emerged that while some forum participants are willing to do anything in their power in order to make it in Ireland, a parallel discourse highlights the fact that some of the members of the forum are not ready to make compromises, nor willing to accept any form of humiliation just so that they have a future in Ireland. And it

appears that these voices become more numerous on the forum in the recent years.

Recession, restrictions… rejection?

Praised and considered a model to follow for the opportunities that it provided during the Celtic Tiger, Ireland is currently recognised by forum users to be facing a very difficult recession. Thus, an increasing number of forum participants signal difficulties in getting a job following the onset of the recession.

Moreover, many of the young and very qualified members of the forum consider re-migrating to countries such as the UK, Canada, the USA or the Nordic European countries (including mainly Sweden and Finland) and, consequently, they advise pre-migrants (seeking information on the forum) to do the same and orient themselves towards countries where current opportunities are expected to be richer and more diverse. In a similar line, Spain, a long time favourite destination of Romanian migrants (but perceived by Romanians in Ireland as a destination for the low skilled Romanian migrants working mainly in the construction and agriculture sector) is now seen by forum participants in a much more positive light. On the one hand they feel that Spain shows more respect for Romanians (as opposed to the UK and Ireland) by not imposing strict labour market restrictions on them following their accession into the European Union (M39, 2008) and, on the other hand, by facilitating a quick processing of various applications to the state institutions. Moreover Spain is considered by some to be much cheaper than Ireland, the locals are also welcoming and the weather is better than in Ireland (M30, 2006).

It is interesting to note that for some, work exploitation has not ceased since Romania acquired its new statute, as a member of the European Union. This is mainly because, for Romanians and Bulgarians, labour market restrictions are still in place and the procedure for obtaining work permits is rather complicated and costly for employers. Moreover, once obtained, the work permit binds the employee to employer thus facilitating the risk of the exploitation of workers.

Existing work restrictions for Romanian citizens complicates to a certain degree the position of the newly arrived migrants, thus rendering them more vulnerable to competition in a labour market that sees fewer and fewer jobs available.

A special amendment to the employment permits' legislation allows Romanians (and Bulgarians) legally residing in Ireland for a period of at least 12 months (prior to January 1st 2007) to work in Ireland without a permit[60]. While this special rule was, in theory, expected to favour the already settled migrants, it emerged that they are not entirely protected from potential problems. Thus, several forum members state that employers are not always knowledgeable of this special amendment to the legislation and it is sometimes difficult to convince them that this is really in place.

While in the view of many forum participants, the requirement of work permits constitutes a huge barrier for Romanian migrants, there are few users highlighting the fact that if one's skills and qualifications recommend them for a particular job, the employer will not see the work permit aspect as a serious barrier (M43, M08, 2006). However, this seems to be the case for highly qualified members of the forum only (predominantly working in large-sized companies, for which the lengthy time and high cost of a work permit application do not constitute significant problems).

The maintenance of employment restrictions for Romanians and Bulgarians following their accession into the EU has however far-reaching implications which go beyond the labour market. In the forum users' views, employment restrictions seem to incorporate elements of political and institutional discrimination against Romanians, but also reflect the negative opinions shared by the natives in relation to these two national groups (i.e. Romanians and Bulgarians)[61].

Moreover since, in theory, employment restrictions on the Irish labour market apply only to non-EU and non-EEA[62] nationals (and Romania and Bulgaria are part of both structures), this highlights a double discourse of discrimination (M25, 2009). In addition, in spite of continuing to keep the labour market open for the 'older' EU members, the decision to maintain employment restrictions for the newest EU members (namely, Romania and Bulgaria) also constitutes, in the opinion of most forum users a clear example of discrimination in relation to the other EU members.

Consequently, this announcement by the Irish government has left Romanians feeling baffled, frustrated, rejected and marginalised. Their dreams

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[60] Source:
http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/migrant_workers/employment_permits/work_permits.html
[61] In their view, social attitudes determined to a certain extent the Irish politicians to make this rather populist decision to curb immigration from the nationals of the two countries.
[62] European Economic Area

to be 'part of the club' have now faded as they still see themselves as 'being kept on the doorstep'. Having to re-evaluate their inner feelings about who they are, and about how Romanianness is perceived by (and in relation to) the others, online Romanians alternate between feeling worthless (and ultimately undeserving of being part of the EU) and feeling empowered to fight for this alleged injustice.

Thus, there are members of the forum accepting this decision and perceiving the 'humiliations' as somewhat understandable given that they are Romanians, therefore renowned for their bad deeds. From this perspective it is argued that nothing can be done in order to resolve this problem in the short term, and that a complete revamping of their image as a nation is required. Their discouragement is furthermore accentuated due to the fact that, just like many Romanians, these forum participants have put their hopes in the process of adhering to the European Union and expected it to wipe away the stigma of being Romanian. Hence, the persistence of these difficulties (employment restrictions in particular) even following the accession to the European Union has led to frustration among many of the forum users. The feeling that they are unequally treated in relation to the other EU members leads to a reinforcement of the stigma and negative feelings that Romanians have about their identities.

There are however also forum members who protest against the decision. For example, immediately after the Irish government's announcement of employment restrictions in October 2006, a memorandum was jointly put together by some of the forum members and the members of the RCI. Signatures were collected from hundreds of Romanians in Ireland in support of the document, which was then forwarded to many Irish state representatives (the President, the Taoiseach[63], TDs[64], MEPs[65]), political parties, Trade Unions, media outlets, The European Commission and the European Parliament, as well as to the Romanian president and prime-minister, other Romanian heads of ministry and the Romanian ambassador to Ireland. The initiative got media attention in both Irish and homeland media; however it did not change the decision of the Irish government.

The protest was perceived by some forum participants as ineffective. In their view, the British government is the one that needs to be blamed for the

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[63] The Irish prime-minister.
[64] a member of Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Irish Parliament
[65] Members of the European Parliament

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Irish decision to maintain the employment restrictions, as the Irish government conforms to whatever 'No. 10 Downing Street' decide.

> Stop wasting your energy by blowing against the wind! Don't you understand here that Irish dance just like as 10 Downing Street dictates?' (M05, 2006)

While this perspective is successful in maintaining a positive image of Ireland (by partly re-assigning the guilt for this decision from the Irish government to the British equivalent), it also illustrates a particular vision of great vs. small powers, political masters and dominated which further reinforces their feelings of inferiority.

It appears thus that recession did not constitute the major factor that produced a shift in the online Romanians' narrative of belonging to the host country. It emerges that the feelings expressed by online Romanians around the time when Romania was preparing to become and EU member contrast significantly with the 'honeymoon' period when Ireland was perceived by many forum members as "the land of opportunities", where they felt welcome, socially accepted and integrated. Romanians on the forum now express their disappointment, their feelings of rejection, and their frustrations caused by the Irish government's decision. Their attitude towards the host society becomes momentarily increasingly negative.

On the one hand, forum participants try to symbolically take revenge by 'retroactively' dismissing Ireland's economic success as a 'matter of luck' and easy access to EU funds; others mention the same 'luck' but in connection to their strategic geographical positions, their economic links with the USA and, last but not least, the advantage of speaking the English language.

On the other hand, given the online Romanians' disappointment with this decision (which they consider as discriminatory), several users find the Irish to be rather hypocritical and treacherous

> [They are] treacherous, they stab you in the back, they don't have the courage to tell you things straight in the face; […] Betrayal is part of their history and that is why they could not form a revolt against the English for about 700 years (M01, 2006)

Accusations of hypocrisy are also levelled at the Irish government as forum members argued that, back in 2004, it was casting stones at the governments of other EU countries for not allowing the members of the newly-joined 10 member states free labour market access. In a similar vein, since the Irish government had made several attempts to regulate the situation of Irish migrants working illegally in the United States, the government's decision in

relation to Romanians seems to highlight, according to several forum users, the existence of double standards.

Online Romanians are of the opinion that the Irish (referring here both to the Irish government, but also to the Irish nation) have forgotten their migration history; hence they are now insensitive to the problems and needs of migrants:

> 150 years ago they were dying of hunger and they were emigrating by millions and now they act all condescending towards those that come here... (M18, 2006)

These views illustrate how deeply hurt Romanians felt when Ireland announced that it was shifting away from its free access to labour market conferred to EU (and EEA) citizens precisely when Romania was becoming a member. They are surprised how the Irish which they admired so much for their warmth and who, they thought, had in the past shared the same fate and troubled history as us, are now rejecting us:

> […] during the time when in Ireland people were eating porridge for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the Irish were working under fake identities in European countries" (M03, 2008).

This type of discourse is apparently in stark contrast to the generally positive image that online Romanians in Ireland previously held about their host country. However, it needs to be pointed out that this discourse was temporary and forum members tended to go on with their lives shortly after the element of surprise caused by this decision faded away.

Nevertheless, while eventually this decision has been accepted by all forum users, a bitter taste still seems to linger in some of the narratives about the host country. Occasionally, feelings of disappointment and humiliation get re-activated when Ireland announces the extension of employment restrictions for Romanians and Bulgarians by yet another year. However, since 2009, there seems to be less emphasis paid to this aspect as forum users begin to accept that Ireland is going through recession and, consequently, a liberalisation of the labour market is rather unlikely.

In conclusion, the announcement of employment restrictions and the discussions that it provoked on the forum are particularly significant for the diasporic identity construction. On the one hand, it illustrates how stigma is reinforced as forum members perceive themselves as rejected precisely at a time that was supposed to be the most amazing achievement for Romanians: their joining of the EU. At the same time, it highlights how the Romanian statement of similarity to the Irish (in relation to their history of poverty and

migration) seems to lose its consistency and this is experienced by online Romanians as an identity crisis.

Regardless of these aspects, there are still many online Romanians who view Ireland as offering better life conditions than Romania or many other countries and this constitutes the main mechanism through which those members of the forum that are well-settled in the country justify their decision not to move elsewhere.

The land of a thousand welcomes?

Words such as 'racism' and 'discrimination' have often been used on the forum to describe various experiences encountered by forum users. This section aims to map out these examples and also to take note of any potential impact that these experiences have on the integration of online Romanians in Ireland and on the construction of their diasporic identities.

One of the key aspects that needs to be noted is that many forum participants argue that the word 'racism' does not apply to situations pertaining to the discriminatory treatment of Romanians in Ireland simply because "we are from the same race as the Irish". Therefore, some members feel that the term 'xenophobia' should be used instead. However, as one of the forum participants points out, the latter concept is not widely used in Ireland and many Romanians as well as Irish are not clear about its exact meaning (M01, 2006). In spite of these clarifications made by many forum users, the term racism is still very much used throughout the discussions and, for this reason, it will be utilised in this thesis as well.

Examples of racism discussed by forum members include a range of experiences. On the one hand, several users mention institutional racism but, at the same time, they point out that this type of racism is generally linked to being a foreigner in Ireland, rather than specifically related to being Romanian. Delays in obtaining residence visas, employment permits or child benefit are among the most numerous situations in which institutional racism has been noted by forum members from 2004 onwards.

Other more subtle examples of perceived racial discrimination are also discussed by some forum members. On the one hand they argue that migrants are always blamed in the case of traffic accidents. Moreover, it is also argued by

some online Romanians that the life of an immigrant seems to have a different value than the life of Irish:

> When it says on the front page that there was a car crash and three Irish have died because they were full of drugs and alcohol everybody cries... they say: <<Oh, poor angels, they died at only 17>>. But when a Lithuanian is killed while on a pedestrian crossing, the comments are something along the lines of <<Such is life. He should have checked twice the oncoming traffic>> (M13, 2007).

Other users state that they perceive the public way of addressing migrants as 'non-nationals' as a racist act aimed at highlighting their apparent lack of nationality and belonging to neither the home or host society.

While these above-mentioned examples seem to refer to discrimination and perceived racist directed at migrants in general, there are also voices on the forum arguing that the act of indistinctly grouping Romanian and Roma (gypsies) under the same label is indicative of the "multiple facets of racism" (M04, 2007). This prompts some online Romanians to take action and set things straight on certain occasions:

> Just the other day I was in a wholesalers', [...] and Paddy the seller said to Paddy the electrician: <<Did you see the Romanians in the Ballymun roundabout?>>? <<Yes, I saw them>>. <<Jeezus, thought it was the circus, I'm tellin' ya>>. <<Yes, they're a feckin' disgrace shittin' and pissin' in the middle of the traffic and all>>. I was very upset by them using the word 'Romanians' so I ventured in the conversation: <<Buddy, take a good look at me. I'm a proper Romanian. Those that you saw only happen to be able to speak Romanian and that's unfortunate. You see me here every once in a while getting gear for my work. You won't see them [gypsies] anywhere else than there: begging or stealing. That's the main difference, not to mention the colour of the skin. As far as I am concerned they're the same scum as the knackers, drunkards and junkies, anywhere around. So don't call them Romanians>>. I generally work in people's houses and some of the owners are really posh and they always ask me where I am from and I always say that I am from Romania and I explain to them the differences between gypsy and Romanian (M40, 2007).

This quote also points out the strong feelings generated by any attempt of 'the others' to assign the label 'Romanian' to gypsies. Thus, gypsies constitute a powerful referent in the construction of Romanian (diasporic) identities and this aspect will be analysed in depth in the following chapter.

Several forum users signalled experiencing discrimination in the process of getting accommodation, ranging from unpleasant interactions with real estate

agents to a perceived refusal on the part of the landlord to accept them as tenants.

Apart from the above-mentioned examples of discrimination and racism experienced, forum users have also included a perceived reticence on the part of the natives when hearing where they came from:

> The most subtle form of racism/xenophobia seems to me when they act surprised that <<Oh you are from Romania and you can do this, or you know that, or you work there. Or that you speak English so well. Where have you studied? You seem so civilised>> […] (F01, 2005)

However, in a different conversation on the forum (three years later) the same user admits that it is likely that, in certain instances, migrants have a rather skewed perception in relation of the attitudes of the natives that they interact with, therefore generating what she calls "the paranoia of the migrant" whereby any word or interaction is suspected of having a racist undertone (F01, 2008). Furthermore, she argues that in many cases the lack of respect which Romanians experience in the homeland is even worse than the so-called discrimination and racism experienced in Ireland.

Thus, in spite of many of the above-mentioned comments, Ireland and the Irish are still regarded by most of the forum users as more welcoming towards other cultures in comparison with other Europeans (among which British, Germans Austrians, French, Italian) and non Europeans (e.g. Canadians)

> I don't know with what idyllic country you are comparing Ireland to [...] Try [to go to] Germany maybe. Before you [know it] racism will 'kill' you. Here Irish […] at least leave you, a poor Romanian immigrant, alone to mind you own business (M16, 2004).

Forum conversations seem to indicate that while some Romanians admit to having experienced discrimination and racism in diverse moments and to various extents, others state that they have been spared from such experiences. Data collected from the forum does not indicate any correlation between the onset of recession and an increase in discrimination or racist attacks experienced by forum members.

Striving to explain why only some Romanian migrants experience racism and discrimination while others don't, many forum members share the opinion that experiences of racism are strongly correlated with the social and work circles in which one is involved. Hence, it seems to be suggested that social

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class differences may explain why some may encounter racism more often than others.

On the one hand, the perceived importance of social class[66], as a shield against (or, on the contrary, as a magnet for) racism implies that some of the forum participants aim to place themselves outside the so-called 'low-class Romanian migrants' category, which is allegedly the main target of discrimination. By suggesting that the particular position on the social ladder dictates how they are treated by the host society, these members of the forum feel enabled to hold on to the image of Ireland as a place that they appropriated and a space where they are happy and feel 'at home', thus refusing to believe that discrimination and racism are also part of this ideal environment.

On the other hand, the same argument points to the fact that the social class of the Irish interlocutors is also relevant. Thus, while the Irish are not, generally speaking, considered by the forum users as a racist nation, some categories (namely, those with very little education, those highly dependent on social welfare) are recognised as more likely to adopt a racist attitude than others. Moreover these discourses seem to be easily 'transferred' to the next generation through primary socialisation:

> […] the sadder part is that kids learn this at home from what their parents are saying… I have heard one kid in the park screaming [to an immigrant kid] <<This is my country!!!>>... I have persistently stared at his mother and she didn't even try to stop him. She was very calm and that is probably because this is what they talk about at breakfast (F01, 2005).

There are also users who suggest that, regardless of their level of education or income or their profession, one may find racists in all social classes:

> I have been witness to racist talks between the Irish and some of them have really high end jobs and they are very welcoming, but none of them would like to have a black person or a gypsy as a neighbour (M03, 2009).

This argument is supported by another participant who cites an existing survey published in the Irish media which highlights the fact that there is an increasing trend among Irish employers to discriminate against non-Irish names during the recruiting process (M25, 2009).

There are also forum users suggesting that, apart from social class, several personality features are to be blamed for racist experiences. For

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[66] Mainly defined on the forum in terms of level of education and prestige of the occupation

example, one member of the forum is of the opinion that by displaying a humble attitude one is prone to being racially discriminated.

> […] it is something related to the attitude to life that each of us has […] The true characters do not feel intimidated by life itself so how can they get intimidated by Irish? (M16, 2004)

Others link racism and discrimination experienced with a lack of sociability and argue that if one is nice and pleasant, nobody will "beat you up" (M64, 2010). This citation however tends to reflect the imperceptibility of some of the more sophisticated forms of discrimination and racism besides being physically abused.

While some online Romanians discuss racist experiences in relation to social class or to personality types, there are also users of the forum who feel that some negative attitudes are also highly dependent on the little and rather stereotypical knowledge that the Irish have about Romania.

> [So when I tell them I am from Romania]… classic answers, after the smile fades from their faces: 1. I've been to Romania many years ago and I know something about orphanages; 2. Oh, I know Dracula and Hagi and Ceausescu; 3. I know Irish companies that work for Romanian orphanages and prepare soup for persons there (F02, 2006).

Last but not least, there are also voices on the forum stating that discrimination, racism and xenophobia are inherent parts of the migratory experience and that we should not necessarily take it personally (F11, 2004; M68, 2004; M59, 2008; F01, 2008).

This section highlighted some of the key aspects mentioned by forum members in relation to their encounters with racism and discrimination in Ireland and also the mechanisms by which these experiences are explained (and to a certain extent justified) by online Romanians. The conclusion seems to point to the fact that, while several examples of discrimination and racism are brought up for discussion on the forum, Romanians still tend to hold a great opinion about the Irish in relation to their openness to cultural diversity. Thus, regardless of any other difficulties or challenges, at the social level they feel that Irish society is mostly welcoming to migrants and this allows them to make Ireland 'a home'.

8.2 One way, or another: Romanians' expectations about integration

The previous section reflected upon the most significant hardships encountered by Romanians in Ireland and also discussed how their diasporic identity construction is revealed and at the same time influenced by these issues.

This section aims to maps the various meanings that participants assign to the idea of integration, but also the mechanisms and strategies employed by online Romanians to cope with the diverse issues that may hinder integration.

How would they like to integrate?

Forum conversations highlighted the fact that, for some Romanians, integration refers to sharing the same concerns and rights as the Irish people. Many of the forum participants use this online space for debating important aspects related to their host country as they assess and criticise, among others, the Irish political decisions and the management of the economy, the new budget, the cost of childcare and the public transport infrastructure. However, while some display a deep interest in these topics and put a lot of passion into the debates, others seem to be less involved, as they argue that, while they are keeping informed about the Irish current context, they do not desire to 'make a life here'.

In relation to rights of the Romanian migrants in Ireland, there is however a strong debate between those forum users supporting the argument that they should have equal rights[67] to the Irish (on the ground that they pay taxes) and those forum members arguing that they should be grateful for anything they are allowed to have and not to expect equal treatment or to make any demands. These opposing views seem to suggest that while some online Romanians are confident in their contribution to Irish society and share the opinion that integration involves at the same time both responsibilities and rights, there are also users who feel that migrants' duty is to give more and expect less in exchange for the plain reason that 'we are not from around here'.

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[67] They do not refer in this context to voting rights that imply having the Irish citizenship, but rather to all other basic rights, including here education, access to medical services, etc.

Probably the most relevant example of these opposing views is illustrated by one of the forum conversations focusing on the relation between schooling and religion during a time when places in school for the children of other religions[68] were scarce:

- And what will those kids who have no place in schools do??? Shall we convert them to Catholicism or what? What is this? A fundamentalist state??? I wonder if something can be done, if somebody could tell them off at the Council of Europe or something... This is incredible how in the 21st century access to education can be conditioned by religious beliefs in an EU country. If Romania would have done this... (F01)

- 15 years ago that was not a problem; don't forget that this is a recent problem due to the economic boom and the arrival of the immigrants. Moreover schools are owned by the church in 97%. They are doing their best to offer access to education for all, but in many situations you cannot find a place in the school near you and then you go to another one. So if we are annoyed because of this thing, what about the Irish parents whose children cannot get a place near their homes (M02)

- Once you let the immigrants in they need to be treated equally (F01)

- That is not true! If Somalians for example would come to Romania does that mean that they have the same rights? The truth is that if you are in a foreign country... you simply have to settle with a secondary status. Maybe you are indeed paying taxes but in today's world it is not only about money. The past counts as well. […] the families of Romanians in Ireland have not contributed to the present situation of this country whereas the Catholic Church did. Catholicism has played the same coagulating role as did the Orthodoxy for Romanians. So I don't think that any Hindu Indian or any Muslim Pakistani or any Orthodox Romanian or Catholic Polish has the moral right to come here and to complain that salaries are too small or that their children cannot find a place in school. You don't like it? Then you can leave because the world is wide and if a country accepts you then you should be happy with whatever is given to you; don't ask for more and especially don't ask for something which is against the interests if the native population (even if that refers to educational system, medical system etc.) (M46)

- Access to education is guaranteed by the law and the law refers to all the residents. The old saying that "The rude, gets the food" or in English "the squeaky wheel get the grease" does not work here. As long as we don't protest then the authorities will just ignore the matter. I for one am decided to pursue the matter to the European Court if my child does not get a place in schools due to religious criteria (M08)

Box 8.1. *Section of the discussion thread entitled 'Catholics-first rule ditched' (2008).*

This sequence of replies presents a fascinating mix of issues in relation to integration, expectations, strategies, and, ultimately, identities. Thus, while there are online Romanians who view that in exchange for their contribution to the economy they are entitled to the fundamental right of education for their children, there are also others who are of the opinion that migrants put pressure on the Irish education system. It is interesting to note that in some cases migrants themselves may adopt the same language and line of argumentation

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[68] Romanians are in a great majority Christian Orthodox.

utilised by media, thus accepting and internalising the stereotypical arguments embedded in the media discourse. The dialogue above also illustrates the belief shared by some online Romanians that true integration can never be achieved by the first generation of migrants (as their input into the host society will never add up to the contribution made by the natives and their families). For this particular reason, they feel that they have no 'moral right' to voice their claims and demands, and they fear that such actions might be interpreted as a lack of gratitude for the opportunities offered by the host society.

These ideas highlight the fact that some forum members feel that perfect integration is necessary and to a great extent can only be achieved by assimilation into Irish society. Moreover, as one forum member suggests, Romanians are easy to assimilate due to the fact that:

> They are the perfect immigrants; they are ready to give up easily their 'national identity'. They do not form [diasporic] communities like the Chinese, the Indians of the Pakistanis [...] (F01, 2007)

Romanians are thus yet again portrayed as individualists (who do not like to associate in communities and organisations) and as lacking any patriotic connections to their homeland, thus rendering them as *tabula rasa* migrants, whose new identities can easily be inscribed onto the void left behind by discarding their old cultural identities.

An interesting debate emerges when one of the forum users is asked by another about the reasons why he chose an Irish name for his son and why he insists that his son learns English perfectly (since both parents are Romanian). His answer provides an insight into how 'perfect integration' is understood by some forum users:

[M16 mentions that his child played together with an Irish child in the park and the mother of the other child was surprised by his son's perfect English accent]

- Perfect integration in a society matters a lot, regardless of your nationality. If some of you want to practice a sort of ethnic separatism why don't you display the Romanian flag only to show that you are 'different' than Irish, and smarter than them' (M16)

- I believe perfect integration would have meant if kids played together and his mother would not ask you where you come from. Because in the meantime when the woman goes home and her husband asks her what they did in the park she will tell him that her daughter played with a non-national (or a non-national's child if you prefer) (M40)

- [It is simply] a disgrace when native language is forgotten (M03)

- With all your efforts and your resources your children will always be non-nationals in Ireland and foreigners in Romania!! And that is going to stay the same for many, many generations to come... (M05)

Box 8.2. *Section from a forum discussion thread (2007)*

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Thus it emerges that for some of the online Romanians assimilation reflects a desire to conform to the host society, implying to a certain extent denying oneself the choice of flagging those identity symbols of the homeland which may not be seen with positive eyes by the Irish.

At the same time, children seem to become key to the process of integration. They are, as one of the forum users argues, "the proof of integration" (M05, 2006) and this may justify to a certain extent the strong desire to make their children 'pass' as Irish. Hence, by naming them traditional Irish/English names and by stimulating them to learn English, parents hope to reduce the two perceived handicaps, namely accent and name, the latter which may clearly point to their migrant origin.

It is interesting to note that in some cases, migrants themselves decide to introduce themselves by using an English-sounding name in order to become more accepted in the Irish society. This is however condemned by some users as a lack of patriotism

> Liam, my Romanian friend, I would be more careful with what you say. Unless you didn't know, you could teach the Irish to pronounce your name correctly Lee View = Liviu, and this is to show you that your patriotism = 0 (ZERO) (M01, 2008).

Thus, as the above citation as well as the previous dialogue (presented Box 8.2) point out, many users of the forum feel that it is impossible and also a disgrace to abandon one's home culture or to internationally deny your children any attachment to the parent's homeland. The result is often a feeling of cultural alienation, a constant pendulation between being "non-nationals in Ireland and foreigners in Romania"

Moreover, in the view of several of the forum users the effect of these rather 'extreme' strategies may be limited as one could never fully deny their nationality

> Some may choose Anglo-Saxon names for their children, other may pretend they are Romanian-Irish or some may speak English at home with their children, but all of them they will remain Romanian. One cannot choose their nationality. For me Irish citizenship (if it will even happen) is only a piece of paper that gives you some flexibility (e.g. one can work without a work permit in Germany or France). I don't intend to give up my Romanian passport. And I won't give up my dream that one day in Romania it will be a better situation and that youth won't be forced to migrate for a better future (M12, 2006)

Also, one needs to accept the fact that the natives will never consider you 'one of their own'

> I feel at home here and I don't need the others approval regarding this. After having spent 10 years in Ireland I still get asked: <<And how do you like Ireland?>> As long as the question is asked in a polite way I tell them that I like it here (F03, 2007).

It emerges thus that for some members perfect integration (or, better said, assimilation) offers the key to settling in the host country. An analysis of the profile of these forum participants tends to highlight that they are often those that have made significant sacrifices in order to stay in Ireland (e.g. working and residing illegally in Ireland). For most of the other members of the forum whose stay in Ireland has been rather straightforward, perfect integration is, to a great extent, neither desirable, nor possible.

In their case, integration often refers to embracing a mix of rituals and 'ways of doing' specific to the host country, thus becoming naturalised and adapted to the new culture, while still feeling a strong connection to their homeland culture.

> Each of us needs to assume a few rituals of the place where they reside… I am aware that once you establish your residence in one country you gave to get naturalised and this implies a process of adaptation. You can't go to one country and expect to be treated according to Romanian customs (M27, 2008).

For others, naturalisation is only achieved once they obtain Irish citizenship. It is thus interesting to note that while for some citizenship represents nothing more than a "piece of paper" (M12, 2006 – previously cited above) which may give them some benefits (such as travelling without a visa to the USA), for others it represents the ultimate reward for successful integration.

In conclusion, this section highlighted the main meanings associated by Romanians online to the process of integration and, at the same time, noted that for some of the participants integration can only be achieved by choosing to immerse completely in the new cultural context presented by the host country. For the others, integration acquired a more hybrid meaning which involved responsibilities to contribute to the host society, as well as equal rights to the native population.

Throughout the forum conversations, there are very few references[69] to any state level or organisational level initiatives in the area of integration, cultural diversity management and/or inclusion. This reflects the fact that even if such initiatives exist/existed, online Romanians are either not aware of them or perhaps they do not necessarily deem them as relevant for their specific context. Thus, for many of the forum participants, integration is considered mainly an individual project.

Many forum users actually stated that they prefer a 'silent integration', one where you are left to mind your own business, while at the same time being charged with a responsibility to change and adapt to the context of the host country.

There is a wide range of individual actions through which online Romanians feel that they can achieve integration at the personal level. On the one hand, they mention the vital role of learning English (or, generally speaking, the language of the host country). This argument is indicative of online Romanians' belief that integration has a significant language component. In their opinion, the availability of free interpreting services for migrants during their interactions with institutions such as hospitals, the court etc. represents a major cost for the budget. Thus, they argue that by refusing them access to such services, migrants will be more motivated to learn English.

Apart from learning the language of the host country, the cultural composition of the network of friends is, in the forum members' view, equally important. In their opinion, having Irish friends constitutes a driver of integration at the personal level, while at the same time it may also act as an indicator of successful integration. Several forum members argue that by belonging to Irish circles of friendship, migrants integrate better and faster, learn the language and customs of the host society and it also proves that Romanians, unlike other diasporic groups, do not segregate into 'little churches'[70]. Last but not least, in some of the forum participants' views, by having Irish friends, one can also

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[69] Such mentions include: the Garda initiative to recruit a multicultural police force (2005); the invitation formulated (also by Garda) to all NGOs dealing with immigration and asylum issues to submit ideas for their corporate strategy plan (2006); several cultural diversity programmes initiated at the company level.

[70] 'Little churches' [bisericuțe] represents a term that Romanians often use to symbolise division of a group into smaller gatherings. The term however has a negative connotation as it points to the scission of a particular group.

promote a more positive image of Romanians through their very own personal example.

Romanians' image and the diverse representations of Romanianness in the public space are recognised by forum users to play a key role in the process of diasporic identity construction. Moreover, from the perspective of integration, most forum members tend to agree that Romania's current image raises significant challenges.

Thus, as one of the forum users argues, revamping their image is crucial before they feel entitled to make any demands about Romanians' situation in Ireland

> Yes but if we ask for something then from what position are we asking them this? From the position of 'non-nationals'? You have to change their attitude and their knowledge about us first. […] In a new workplace you have to first demonstrate your "good-worker" qualities and then ask for a "wage increase" or a better position. Who the hell will give you any raise unless you made yourself visible […] (M05, 2006)

A good plan in theory, forum discussions highlight several potential practical difficulties encountered (by diasporas in particular) in their quest for re-branding their national culture. Firstly, a perceived lack of support from both the home as well as the host countries is denounced by forum participants. This refers in particular to financial support needed for undertaking any activities targeted at raising the profile of Romanians abroad. At the same time, it is also demanded from homeland's institutions to take a more proactive stance and to engage in protecting Romanians abroad from the symbolic attacks of 'the others'.

Secondly, the attempt to re-construct the image of their homeland requires an alternative set of values and elites whose role is to replace the main pillars of identity currently in place. Thus, online Romanians recognise the importance of finding new models to follow and to use in their reconstruction project

> And we are guilty as well because we praise ourselves on how good we are, how big and smart we are, but in exchange there are very few that want to show the Irish […] that we know what we want and that we can achieve that. So if we have such a behaviour and we don't show who we really are and in what way we can contribute to the Irish society then we can't really have any demands (M03, 2006)

Apart from this, in the view of many forum participants, a change of image also requires a change of their mentality and, more importantly their self-

perception. Thus, the image change needs to start with how they think about themselves

> We have to start perceiving ourselves as their equals, otherwise they will treat us as inferiors - I guess that starting with Jan 1st 2007 those that need to change their opinion about themselves are the Romanians living abroad […] because if we want to move forward and not always be the last, we have to start perceiving ourselves as their equals. We have tolerated a lot the burden of those who have committed crimes outside Romania. So any person that is honest needs to keep their head held high. The only difference between us and them is that they were born HERE. This joining of EU should bring about a new mentality for the Romanians. LET'S NOT ENTER EUROPE WITH OUR PANTS DOWN (M44, 2006)

The need to restore their long-forgotten pride in who they are is thus viewed by many to constitute the foundation of their new proposed image. It is thus argued that they have to 'believe in themselves' before they make others believe in them too, and ultimately this will result in a more positive image of Romania and Romanians.

Discussion and conclusions

This chapter highlighted some of the main aspects emerging from the forum discussions in relation to Ireland and the Irish. It brought to the forefront the double-voiced discourse of 'love' and 'hate', criticism and praise about both the natives and the host country.

Findings indicated that, before the start of recession, Ireland was perceived by many forum users as the ideal country for migrants due to its wide range of available job and career opportunities as well as the warmth of the locals. While it is uncertain whether these arguments constituted the 'pull-factors' (i.e. the motives why many online Romanians came to this country), it is a certainty that they represent the reasons why they decided to stay.

The relation between forum members and Ireland was not necessarily one of 'love at first sight', but rather one of continuous discovery of 'the other' and of self-discovery. At times, Romanians on the forum saw themselves as similar to the Irish nation in respect of their history of migration and poverty as well as in relation to their cultural heritage and this strengthened their connection to the host country. At other times, they felt their ways parting and they experienced disappointment and a feeling of betrayal when the 'honeymoon' came to an end.

In October 2006 Ireland's 'fidelity' to Romanians was tested and it allegedly failed: the Irish government announced the continuation of employment restrictions for Romanian workers. The hopes that their EU membership would prove to be a healing patch for their identities wounded by stigma were crushed and many Romanians experienced a deep identity crisis. While the crisis has been only temporary, bitterness about 'what happened' can still be noted occasionally on the forum.

Portrayals of the Irish on the forum also follow two distinct directions: on the one hand they are sometimes presented by online Romanians in critical terms simply because they represent 'the competition', both in respect of the various available opportunities, but also, at a deeper level, competition for 'Ireland's heart'. By pointing at Irish failings, Romanians restore pride in themselves as they feel needed in Ireland. This argument has been briefly mentioned by Berger and Mohr (1989) as they describe how migrant workers in Europe tend to highlight the fact that they have more stamina and are more cunning that the natives, thus ultimately aiming to alleviate their feelings of inferiority. The idea of migrants' perceived superiority over the natives has also

been mentioned by Goffman (1990 [1963]) who sees in this type of attitude a mechanism of symbolical inversion of the stigma and feelings of inferiority. Moreover, as Goffman points out, in the case of the stigmatised, there tends to be a permanent alternation between feeling inferior and adopting a bravado-type attitude.

This also seems to be the case for the Romanians on the forum as they shift between a critical portrayal of the Irish and a view that depicts them as models for Romanians to follow. In the opinion of some members, the Irish excel precisely in those areas where Romanians lack the most, namely pride and unity.

A surprising finding was that, in comparison with existing literature pertaining to the study of migrants and their experiences of discrimination and racism in host societies (especially in relation to media representation), online Romanians mention very few examples of openly racist/ discriminatory encounters. On the one hand, this may be indicative of the fact that Romanians are well integrated (or perhaps even assimilated). While this may be the case for some of the forum participants (whose declared aim was to become perfectly integrated/ assimilated in the Irish society), many online Romanians offer a different line of argument. They view social status as the key factor that explains why many forum members do not feel racially discriminated in Ireland, while other Romanians do. This view reveals two very important aspects. One refers to the fact that the online Romanian community seems to perceive itself as an elite community in comparison with the other Romanians in Ireland. Secondly, by invoking this type of explanation, forum users have a sense of being in full control of their fate in the host country, thus being able to avoid any disagreeable experiences.

Social class also appears to be a key factor in relation to the perpetrators of racist actions or comments. Thus, it was argued that low-class Irish are more likely to discriminate and to manifest a lack of tolerance towards cultural diversity. However, confirming Byrne's (2011) findings, forum data also seems to point towards several situations when a racist or discriminatory treatment originated from the upper classes in Irish society.

In conclusion, the chapter highlighted the fact that the host society constitutes a key referent in the process of diasporic identity construction, thus re-confirming that migrants' identities are never immutable and entirely determined by the homeland culture. It also pointed out that online Romanians constructed a wide set of meanings around the concept of integration into the

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host society, ranging from sharing the same rights, responsibilities and daily concerns as the Irish to the intense desire on the part of some members to feel assimilated. Furthermore, their expectations from the process of integration had a significant impact on the strategies that they engaged in order to achieve their goals and this, ultimately, left a clear imprint on their identity construction.

Chapter 9 – We're not like them: the 'feared' others and the 'model' others

Overview of the chapter

Apart from the diasporic connection with 'the home' and 'the host' discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, many other dimensions of 'us' and them' emerged from the forum conversations.

This chapter starts by focusing on the role of these markers in the online Romanians' diasporic discourse and it also provides evidence of how these differences from other groups are imagined and explained.

A great variety of 'others' have emerged from the forum data including, among others, political structures (EU vs. non-EU); geographic and geopolitical entities ('the East' vs. 'the West'; European vs. non-European; Balkanic vs. non-Balkanic), religious beliefs (Catholic vs. Orthodox), but also a wide variety of other ethnic and diasporic groups in Ireland and abroad. The features of all these groups are discussed by forum members in the context of discovering who 'we' are and how Romanianness is defined.

The second part of the chapter focuses on 'the others within', thus taking a glimpse at the degree of homogeneity within the Romanian community defined by the virtual borders of the forum. How do the forum members perceive their online community in relation to the wider community formed by Romanians in Ireland? Are Romanians online a homogenous community? And, finally, are they a diaspora?

These are the main questions which will be answered in this last chapter of the thesis, as it aims to discover the role played by each of these markers in the process of shaping their collective identities.

9.1 The others in the Romanian narratives of identity

"They are not Romanians, they just have Romanian passports" – The Gypsies in the Romanian discourse

Before exploring in depth this particular dichotomy, it is important to highlight the fact that the opposing terms in this relation 'Romanian' and 'Gypsy' are not necessarily self-excluding categories. Thus while the concept 'Romanian' points to a particular national identity, 'gypsy' refers mostly to an ethnic identity – thus, there are gypsies that are Romanians, hence the opposition is not a straightforward one between two distinct, non-overlapping aspects, but rather a constructed discourse of difference.

Multiple references emerged from forum data in relation to this particular aspect, as Romanians online choose to define themselves against the gypsies: "we are not gypsy". Moreover, Romanians seem to deny Gypsies of an intrinsic role in the Romanian diaspora[71], by symbolically excluding them from the nation: "they are not Romanians, they just have Romanian passports" (M55, 2007).

Also an important note needs to be made in relation to the use of the word 'gypsy' rather than the alternative terms 'Roma' or 'Rroma'. The decision to employ the word 'gypsy' throughout this chapter is mainly justified by the fact that forum participants often use the word 'ţigan' [gypsy] to refer to this ethnic minority. In their view, the other labels seem rather artificial and politically constructed[72].

Analysing the views presented by online Romanians, it emerged that gypsies are mainly constructed as scapegoats and, consequently, they are blamed for most criminal or other allegedly shameful activities committed by Romanian citizens. Consequently, gypsies are often associated by most forum members with begging and stealing (and there do not appear to be any variations in this respect throughout the period covered by data analysis, 2004-2010).

Moreover, according to some of the forum opinions, their involvement in such activities constitutes precisely the aspect that sets them apart from 'typical' Romanians (M03, 2006). For example, in a forum conversation discussing the

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[71] This constitutes the reason why this aspect is discussed in this section of the chapter, rather than the following one which discusses the homogeneity of the Romanian diaspora in Ireland, namely 'the others within'
[72] This aspect will be discussed in depth later on in this chapter.

new Irish legislation in relation to begging near the ATM machines, one user argues that gypsies beg because it "pays off" and because "they don't like to work, while Romanians break their backs working" (M01, 2010). A comprehensive analysis of the entire content of the forum archives indicated that this particular view is shared by most online Romanians. Thus, while there are voices on the forum suggesting that gypsies that beg are mainly the victims of their exploiters who become richer by controlling an easy-to-manipulate mass of uneducated people, this type of discourse is only supported by a very small group of the forum users.

In relation to stealing, some forum participants expressed their concern that there is, in reality, a vicious circle signalled by the fact that gypsies' negative deeds tend to get ignored by the authorities, and the lack of punishment, in turn, leads them to keep their behaviours unaltered. One user mentions the example of Italy where authorities have for many years ignored the problem of the gypsy camps surrounding the major Italian cities and that "when they finally decided to intervene, it was too late"[73] (M05, 2008). Another participant mentions that the authorities are often afraid of being accused of injustice and racism and thus they leave many of the criminal activities unpunished (M03, 2008).

The alleged "refusal to work" on the part of the gypsies is also commented on by many participants to the forum. Several forum users appeal to a range of factors from the tumultuous history of the gypsies (e.g. slavery, the Holocaust, sedentarisation, the Communist demographic policy, marginalisation and impoverishment) in order to explain their current life conditions.

However, the majority of online Romanians tend to refute the argument that the history of the gypsies still plays an important role in justifying their present circumstances:

> If they want to be treated like normal people then they should stop living like animals. They always excuse themselves because history has been unkind to them. Any attempt, any funds spent on them, PHARE programmes are just wasted money. Nothing will change. Brussels has not yet understood that Gypsy law is above anything else […] And don't tell me that I am racist because I have nothing against people of colour (I even had a black girlfriend) (M06, 2009).

It is thus argued that gypsies do not make any effort to improve their situation, hence their poverty and their involvement in criminal activities tends to

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[73] The camps were already established and the locals were already angry in relation to the existence of these types of 'dwelling arrangements' in the area.

be blamed upon their culture (the so-called 'gypsy law') thus rendering all efforts to improve their situation as doomed to fail.

> If we need to help them, then they have to make the first step […] I personally have nothing against gypsies, and I know their situation relatively well. But if they don't want to change and to make their image more positive then we could try as much as we want, but still we will not achieve anything. It is not the case to feel pity for them (M03, 2006).

Moreover, the views that stealing, lack of honesty and begging are inherent parts of the gypsy culture have been encountered on many occasions on the forum and have even been referred to in one instance as "the cultural diseases" of the gypsies.

Consequently, in many of the forum members' opinion, gypsies are guilty because of their choices and for the discrimination that they are experiencing. For example, in June 2009 when a group of gypsy families had been attacked in Belfast, some forum users commented that there must be a reason why they are hated by so many people (M08, M13, 2009). There are also however forum members arguing that gypsies can hardly be blamed for this situation and that, in this particular context, the violence is most likely symptomatic of a conflict between the classes at the margins of society (M24, M02, 2009).

The marginalisation of gypsies in society is furthermore accentuated by the belief that they have no real contributions to make to the host society, and that, in exchange, they exploit the system in order to obtain a wide range of benefits. For example, before Romania joined the European Union, gypsies were thought by some forum participants to make-up the most part of all Romanian asylum applications in Ireland (and the UK as well)

> By the way, did anybody see the show last night on BBC about the asylum seekers in UK […] Do you know how they were calling us? Romanian bastards and of course that 99.99999999% percent of them they meant gypsies! (F19, 2005)

Due to their alleged high dependency on social welfare, gypsies are considered by many forum users as a burden to the state. Moreover, it is deemed by some online Romanians that they have no right to social welfare as they have not worked a second in their lives (M08, 2009). Gypsies are thus viewed as exploiters of the system and that supposedly constitutes a decisive element in their decision to migrate to a particular location. Consequently, because "they are always after the benefits" (M02, 2006), several users feel that it is important to beware of them and never allow them to have too many rights:

> The most important thing is NOT to give them accommodation and social welfare because this is exactly why they came here for: accommodation and food and begging. If they will not be given social welfare they will evaporate, as they cannot survive only by begging. And the climate here is not suitable for sleeping rough as they did in Rome (where you get summer for 7-8 months and no rain). They came here because they have heard from other crows[74] which came here a long time ago that in Ireland they get housing and meals and they came here from the first few weeks [of Romania joining EU] so that they don't risk missing the opportunity […] If the Irish make a mistake and they give a few bed and breakfast, then they will wake up the next morning and all of them [the gypsies] will be here […] It makes me laugh when you hear McDowell[75] saying that they came here <<to get free labour market access>> (M51, 2007).

In addition to the emphasis on 'their negative deeds' (stealing, begging, claiming social welfare), gypsies are also denied by some of the forum users any positive contribution to the society, from both an economic as well as a cultural point of view). The fact that during the Communist regime in Romania many gypsies had jobs is dismissed by some forum users as the exclusive merit of the regime that forced them into jobs, rather than a genuine desire on their part to work (M13, M06, 2009). Others argued that even those gypsies that had a job still engaged in "part-time stealing" (M08, M50, 2009). There are also some participants who comment on the fact that gypsies do not have a significant cultural input in the society, and that the few 'people of value' of gypsy origin are simply "too few to actually matter".

It thus appears that there is often no differentiation made between various categories of gypsies, and this ethnic group is deemed as an amorphous mass, a residual category where 'dirt' is assigned. As one user notes, an important role of the gypsies is that they can easily be used as scapegoats due to their visibility, thus taking the attention away from the real problems in a particular society:

> […] we unfairly tend to see only their negative parts, but not ours – corruption and politicians that steal more than the gypsies would ever steal (F01, 2010).

However, the image of gypsies as 'victims' upsets many of the forum users and they argue that gypsies often tell lies to pretend that they are innocent or to prove that they are victims of the world they live in (M17, 2005). Thus, gypsies are in the forum users' view the 'inauthentic poor' and they cannot believe that people take them as authentic (F23, 2004). To a certain extent,

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[74] Derogatory term for gypsy
[75] Former Irish Minister for Justice

several participants believe that the image of gypsies as victims is, to a great extent, kept alive by the diverse NGOs, thus aiming to justify their existence and funding received (M24, 2009; M13, 2009).

The number of gypsies also constitutes a major issue in the opinions of some forum members. There are fears that they will soon outnumber Romanians back home (especially given the significant number of Romanians leaving the country) (M56, 2008). In parallel, there are also concerns expressed that gypsies are slowly invading Ireland (M06, 2010).

Besides the quantitative argument, there is also the perception among some forum members that Romania tends to get increasingly gypsy-nised (M54, 2010), referring to an increased media presence of cultural productions (e.g. gypsy music and entertainment TV productions that have gypsies as the main focus) which are of perceived low quality.

Given the negative imagery associated with the gypsies, it comes as no surprise that they are also considered to blame for most part of the perceived negative image that Romanians have today (not just in Ireland, but almost anywhere in Europe):

> [...] I am not even going to mention the subway [in Italy]. When a gypsy goes there with his accordion first of all he will scream: "E adesso cantiamo una canzone Romena" *[transl. "And now we sing a Romanian song"]* – only so that the Italians find out that he is from Romania. And you, as a Romanian, feel so embarrassed that you want to jump out of the window of the subway train [...] (M06, 2008).

The intensity of the belief that it is gypsies that need to be blamed for the Romanian image deficit, leads some participants to comment that gypsies "hold the copyright to the Romanian image" (M02, 2009). Moreover, when in 2007 a group of Romanian gypsies had temporarily set a camp in a roundabout in Dublin, the event created a tremendous awareness around the Romanian community in Ireland and a sort of media attention which online Romanians were not keen to have. This occasion prompted one user to note that these gypsies should be accused of denigrating the Romanian state and its national identity and national symbols (M03, 2007). However, one user finds the media attention over this issue unfair, since it constituted nothing out of the ordinary when compared to Traveller sites:

> [...] there should have only been a very brief coverage in the media about gypsies being evacuated by the Gardai for disturbance of the public order and that is it. Why do they have to make such a big fuss from this? […] Towards Wicklow, before

> you get to Bray, on the right hand of the highway, there is a flock of ginger gypsies, the same gathering and the same dirt, only that they live in caravans […] (M40, 2007).

Given the mainly negative characterisations of gypsies stemming from forum participants' discourse as well as the perception that 'our' image (and ultimately 'our' cultural identities) is invariably bound to theirs, many strategies aimed at the separation between 'us' and 'them' have been discussed on the forum. It is thus viewed that positive images of Romania need to replace the gypsy images in the media and in the public representations of Romanianness.

The most mentioned strategy to introduce clear lines of distinction between Romanians and the gypsies simply refers to creating awareness about 'our' deeds and 'their' deeds. For example, following Romania's joining of the European Union, when Ireland has published data about the number of asylum applications, many Romanians online were surprised that Romania was still figuring on the list (in spite of the fact that, as citizens of an EU country, Romanians would not be entitled to apply for asylum)

> Don't you think that we should write a letter to the Department of Justice to ask them to reject their asylum applications and to make a difference between us and 'THEM'? Even if they will not eventually approve their asylum applications, we should still avoid giving them another opportunity to write these things about Romanians invading asylum application centres (M51, 2007).

Another very much-debated suggestion refers to the changing of the name used for addressing this ethic group from 'Roma/Rroma' to 'Gypsies'. In the view of many of the forum users, the name 'Roma' is too similar to 'Romanian', thus bearing a lot of blame for the usual confusion between the two groups.

Debates surrounding this particular aspect can be noted in various conversation threads. For example, a discussion about the new ban on begging near ATM machines (2010) has generated an interesting exchange of opinions.

> [sarcastically] So you mean Roma does not come from Romania? (M04)
>
> why are they no longer called gypsy? In the history books they were known as gypsies (M03)
>
> in the history books they were recorded as gypsies until comrade Iliescu[76] and his gang came to power (M13)

Furthermore, in the forum participants' view, the decision to re-brand this ethnic group as 'Roma' is offensive to gypsies as well:

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[76] Former Romanian President between 1990-1996 and 2000-2004.

> I don't know where this word [Roma] comes from and when was it invented. When did they stop being called 'gypsy'? I met real gypsies and they are proud to be called gypsy. They even felt offended if I would not call them such (M03, 2006)

Thus it emerges that online Romanians feel that the term 'Roma' is nothing more than a label, and a political invention having nothing in common with the ethnic group. Any other name besides 'gypsy' is thus in their opinion simply (politically) incorrect:

Consequently, some suggest changing the name (and reverting back to 'gypsy') by any means (e.g. national ruling, proposition to the European Parliament). There are however also several members of the forum who voice concerns about such actions as they fear that, by interfering with a very delicate issue such as the one in question, they risk being perceived as racist for trying to openly discriminate between them and 'the Others'.

> The [Romanian] Euro Parliamentarians [a.k.a. MEPs] should initiate an action to change the name from 'Roma' to 'gypsies' [...] But I am concerned that we would be rather negatively affected and ridiculed by this. For me, it is not important how they call themselves, because this does not change the background of the problem and that is that Romanian citizens are begging (F01, 2010)
>
> We would be called racists and xenophobes for this (M25, 2010)

Apart from the name given to this ethnic group, some of the forum participants also view the need for a clear line of demarcation between the two cultures, based on the fact that gypsies themselves allegedly wish that the uniqueness and the authenticity of their culture is recognised (F21, 2010).

Furthermore, the issue of racial origin is also occasionally brought up for discussion. However, this argument is rejected by several members. For example, during a radio show one of the spokes-persons for the Romanian community declared that "Roma people are not Romanians, they are Romanian citizens, but not Romanians; they came from India". This argument caused the reaction of another forum user who felt that it is unfair to play down on biological characteristics or the so-called gypsy Indian origins in order to mark the line of difference between us and them.

> We should be more careful with certain things […] They may have come from there [India], but after so many hundreds of years I guess they have earned their right to permanent residence in Romania. If we protest against racism and xenophobia in the Irish society, then I don't think it is correct to be racist ourselves. At the end of the day not all gypsies are beggars and not all PIN number thieves are gypsy (F18, 2006).

As it can easily be noted, not many supporters of the gypsy minority can be encountered on the forum. Furthermore, by being completely absent from the forum themselves, the gypsy point of view is never presented. The very few participants in the forum who strive to 'defend' gypsies or at least to propose a more balanced approach on the forum are generally those Romanians who work/have worked in the voluntary sector and those who tend to exhibit a tolerant attitude towards other cultures as well.

While there are not too many advocates of gypsies among online Romanians, there are many occasions when some of the forum members have expressed opinions which could be categorised as defamatory or even racist. However, in spite of the predominantly negative comments about gypsies, many participants seem to detach themselves from a racist attitude.

> I have many ethnic Roma friends and I really don't have anything against them. My only concern was the perception of the others regarding Romanians! And honestly I don't like to be asked every step of the way <<How come you are Romanian but you are not dark?>> Then who are we Romanians supposed to be?? I guess everybody needs to know who we really are. Of course we have our dried stumps as well, BUT I have not seen any Romanian here begging! […] We should live a very nice life and be proud that we are Romanians!!!' (F09, 2006).

Thus, new racism appears to be stemming from many of the forum conversations. It is argued by several users that the need to clearly separate between the two ethnic groups in the public imaginary is essential and that it does not necessarily imply that they are racist. In their view, "a little exaggeration" is not bad if it serves the purpose (M01, 2006) and others "tend to do it too" (F05, 2006), thus rendering such acts 'acceptable'.

Several forum participants point out that perhaps the process of their identity construction should include more diverse references: "there is more about our identities than just the 'us vs. gypsy' discourse" (F18, 2006). However, in spite of this, nearly all definitions of Romanianness commence with a separation from the 'feared' gypsy image.

Striving to understand the seemingly eternal presence of the gypsy-other in the Romanians' identity discourse, several forum users point out that, in spite of their European dimension (gypsies live in all countries in Europe), Romanians have often been framed by 'the Occident' who made gypsies a Romanian problem, hence our duty to clarify the situation (M03, F02, 2007; F01, 2010).

In spite of the existing rather negative discourse, there are also members of the forum who see this ethnic group as a crucial referent in their identity

construction mainly because it constitutes the symbolic nemesis of Romanians, and the metaphorical fighting of this arch enemy is what keeps their nation united:

> I am actually glad that we have the gypsies, what would otherwise keep the Romanian nation united, if not for our common enemy, the gypsies… Thank God that they are still our 'enemies' because all of our former 'enemies' are now gone minding their own business: Hungarians have their motorways, the Turks know how to make money out of tourism, Bulgarians the same… (F01, 2010)

As it emerges from the above citation, gypsies also seem to represent one of the few 'others' against which Romanians still express a sense of superiority, given the current context of perceived inferiority in relation to most of their former 'enemies', who are perceived to be better-off than them.

In conclusion, it seems that the discourse of online Romanians in relation to gypsies is rather negative, closely reproducing similar stereotypes and myths as those reflected in the media: they are portrayed as involved in stealing and begging and as a burden to the state, particularly when they are coming in huge numbers. At the same time, it emerges that while this ethnic group represents a negative referent in most of the online Romanians' identity discourses, gypsies provide a sense of unity among Romanians as they act as the 'common enemy'.

The 'East', the 'West', the European and the rest

Forum discussions also highlight the importance of a variety of geographical and geopolitical referents in the construction of online Romanians' collective identities: the 'East' and the 'West', Europe and non-Europe, the EU and non-EU all constitute important markers in their discourse.

Generally speaking, the 'West' and the 'East' signify for Romanians the opposition between the space of civilisation and, respectively, the space of stigma. The Western space is assigned mainly positive connotations in online Romanians' imaginary: western countries are deemed to be more civilised (M17, 2008), their citizens do more volunteer work (F05, 2006), and their products are better made[77] (M02, M25, 2009).

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[77] A main role is played in this respect also by China's predominance in the manufacturing industry and the perception that Chinese-made products are not durable

In the view of one of the forum members, the perceived superiority of the Occident stems from the deeply embedded sense of worthlessness of things that are Romanian. Thus, they tend to deem everything foreign as better than its Romanian equivalent.

> [This friend] graduated here [Galway Institute of Technology] and then he had the graduation exam at home as well. All professors had praised him for graduating here, because it was 'foreign'. It is the same conception that everything that is foreign must be better. The occidental mirage… (M16, 2004).

The positive values that they attribute to the Occident are also reflected in the formulation of online Romanians' aims and expectations from their homeland. Thus, according to several forum participants, Romania's goal should be to compare itself with 'the West' rather than with 'the East' (M25, F01, 2010). There is the expectation that the West will have a positive impact on Romanians and that it will civilise us:

> We, Romanians are generally more primitive, but in about 20 years or so, when we will rid of this rough skin, we will be 'sophisticated' too and we will not be so different from the "occidentals" [...] (F01, 2010)

According to one of the forum members, the roots of this competition between 'the East' and 'the West' and Romanians' longing to be more like the West are not a recent 'invention', but they rather originate during the communist regime when Romanian industry was kept alive by the desire to show the West that "we could do it too" (M08, 2006).

While 'the West' is viewed with very positive eyes by online Romanians, 'the East' (and in particular the Eastern Europeans) are characterised by the forum members in mainly negative terms: they are violent (M27, 2008); they are disrespectful drivers (M08, 2009), thus they are mainly a symbol for 'the uncivilised'. Moreover, at the political level, one user finds the Eastern democracies as rather 'immature' in comparison with the genuine Western democracies (M06, 2007).

There are some users who do not agree with these generalisations. However it appears that many forum participants share the view that between the East and the West there is a considerable difference in mentalities (although the full extent of these differences often remains implicit.

Apart from the 'level of civilisation', one aspect that seems to differentiate the 'Westerners' and the 'Easterners' is the lack of trust in other people. Thus, as one forum member argues, those from the East (especially those that still live

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there) tend to be fear that someone is out to get them (a consequence of the oppressive Communist regimes in many of the eastern European countries and the constant fear of the secret services), while the Westerners are more trusting in people during their interactions (F01, 2009).

Several users also find the media representations of Eastern Europeanness demeaning. For example, one of the forum participants cites a feature report about a Polish radiologist that is working now in a restaurant in Ireland for 350 euro a week (F02, 2008) and argues that this is the kind of portrayal of people from the 'East' who are presented to the public, thus rendering the label of Eastern European as stigmatic (M03, 2006).

Furthermore, on some occasions there is also perceived discrimination (e.g. from various state institutions, GPs etc.) thus prompting one user to wonder if he has been treated differently because Romanians are "poor nobodies from the East" (M18, 2006). Another user concludes that Eastern Europeans tend to be perceived as a different category of migrants:

> The Irish have nothing against the Spanish or the French, but then there are the Polish and the Eastern European that come all together in pack (M13, 2008).

This observation is very important as it signals a possible further segmentation of relations, not just between 'being native' or 'being a migrant', but also between migrants of different origins. Thus, it emerges that the experiences of discrimination are not identical among various categories of migrants.

In relation to feelings of belonging to either 'the East' or 'the West', multiple voices on the forum indicate that there is a huge gap between the two entities and that, at least momentarily, Romanians are still outside the privileged space of 'the West':

> […] in spite of all the patriotic clichés posted on all forums THIS is the status of Romania today: we are outside the Occidental "courtyard", in which the Irish […] have been for a long time (M53, 2006)

The above quote reveals the fact that Romanians compare themselves with the 'others', and, at times, disappointment may emerge as they perceive themselves to be 'outside' the symbolic Occidental space, while their relevant 'others' are already in.

A sense of inferiority is also revealed in the perception of some users who point out that there will never be an economic migration flow from the west

to the east, thus revealing that, in their view, the developmental gap between two geographical spaces can never be reduced.

However, in spite of the sense of inferiority occasionally expressed by some online Romanians, other forum participants argue that Romanians are entitled to belong to the Western space mainly because they are not worse than other similarly 'undeserving' countries but which are already in.

In addition to the East/West dimension, another particularly important marker of identity for online Romanians refers to their European belonging. The dichotomy of 'European and non-European' and the meaning that forum members assign to the two opposing terms overlaps to a certain degree with the East/West distinction and also to the question of EU vs. non-EU belonging (which will be discussed in the following section) .

For many of the forum participants, 'being European' represents mainly a geographical referent, a physical space to which they clearly belong. However, while inside Europe, online Romanians occasionally feel that they occupy a marginal position, and, according to one forum user, this contrasts strongly with Romania's (perceived) former position in Europe: "From the granary of Europe[78] we have become the garbage of Europe" (F25, 2010).

There is also the perception among some members of the forum that certain European countries are more valued than others. In order to illustrate this point of view, one forum participant brings up an example from the Irish context. She points out that when a Swiss student was killed in Ireland, this event captured the attention of the (Irish) media and national apologies were offered to the parents of the victim. At the same time, when a Romanian was murdered (also in Ireland) by local thugs, the event only received a brief mention in the media (F01, 2007). Apart from highlighting the perceived marginalisation of Romanians in Europe, this example also reveals that often forum members perceive and decode media messages through the ethnic lens (i.e. what the message discloses in relation to their ethnicity and the ethnic relations with the others), thus rendering invisible some of the other elements of the context in which the message was produced.

While marginalisation is thus apparent in relation to some of the other European countries, occasionally online Romanians manifest a degree of

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[78] Romania as the 'granary of Europe' represents a characterisation of Romania which can be traced back as early as 1938. There is however no statistical support for this affirmation (Source: http://www.mediafax.ro/economic/a-fost-vreodata-romania-granarul-europei-7021770). This characterisation however has been occasionally re-enacted throughout history in order to boost patriotic feelings and confidence in the mother-land.

superiority in relation to (some) non-European countries. Moreover, it emerged that several forum participants display a low tolerance towards some of the non-European diasporas. However, it appears that such opinions are not routinely generated by plain racism, but rather they seem to be indicative of an acute desire to fit into the host society, hence uncritically copying the various negative tones present in some of the media representations of these ethnic minorities in the host country. For example, as one user justifies his decision for choosing Ireland instead of Britain he argues that London is "out of the question" since

> [...] it is over-crowded and it was invaded by Muslims with turbans, Indians, Chinese and Black people which you see every step of the way (I wonder if the English are not a minority now in London)' (M27, 2008)

At other times they adopt this tone towards the non-European diasporas because they feel in very close competition with them in the Irish labour market, especially since despite their accession to the European Union, Romanians still need work permits in order to access employment in Ireland. Thus, the benefits that some of the non-European asylum seekers allegedly have are perceived by one forum member as unfair:

> […] they need to start from level zero, just like we did. But in many cases they get social welfare, they do nothing with their lives and they refuse job offers because they are in education […] Why? […] Maybe I would have wanted to go to a college here to study, but I couldn't because if I didn't work from 8:00 to 20:00 they would send me back home because the company would not apply to a work permit. So now where is the equality? I have to compete on the labour market with one that has studied on the public funds and now they have better opportunities. So in this situation, yes I am being racist, but I feel discriminated. (M01, 2008)

On several other occasions Romanians online have expressed similar concerns, arguing that they feel discriminated (against other EU members) and treated the same or even worse than the nationals of non-European countries:

> […] Ireland still welcomes immigrants from African countries and Asia! Well if there is no more space left on the labour market for Romanians, then why do they take on these fake students from Asia and Africa that have nothing to do with study, they are like working on a 'scholarship' (F20, 2006).

Even the Western non-European, namely the USA is sometimes the target of arrogance and jokes in relation to their intelligence and their culture (M13, M08, 2009) even though, in many other occasions on the forum it is

argued that the job and career opportunities are superior over there (in comparison to Ireland or Europe).

Forum discussions also reveal that the European space becomes for online Romanians more than a geographic location (where Romania is undoubtedly included), but also a symbolic space to which they do not yet belong. Thus, as one user points out, Europe is a space of "civilised citizenship" (M19, 2007), and Romanians are on their track of becoming part of this space, regardless of how difficult the way will be (M52, 2009; M04, 2004).

Last but not least, it also emerges that for several participants, Europe remains a space of familiarity. From this point of view, it is argued that the term 'migration' might be too strong to define relocation to another country on the continent (given the proximity to their homeland). The term rather applies to the act of moving to far away lands such as the USA, Canada or Australia.

In conclusion, it emerges that the distinction between East and West in the online Romanians' opinions mainly reflects the opposition between the image of the civilised Western Europe and that of the primitive Eastern Europe. Hence, for the forum members, 'the West' represents more than a geographical frame, but rather a space that is deeply infused with positive values and which sets an example for Romanians to follow.

Apart from providing a key geographic anchor for Romanian identities, 'being European' symbolises a particular mentality (involving mainly being refined, sophisticated and civilised), thus constituting a desideratum for Romanians on the forum.

Making it into the European Union – narratives of hope and disappointment

Forum conversations point towards a third dimension (namely EU vs. non-EU) which further adds to the symbolic space constructed at the intersection between the East and the West, European and non-European belonging.

Before Romania's accession to the European Union, there was a huge wave of support for the joining process and also high hopes have emerged in relation to their future in the EU.

> I believe that after January 1st, things will change significantly – let's have a bit of patience. Romanians managed to get by even during Ceausescu – and back then you had to flee the country.

> So I believe we will manage now and I don't believe that the future will play any more tricks on us from now on (M44, 2006).

Many online Romanians looked towards the European Union with great optimism as they argued that EU membership will change Romania for the better (F02, 2004) while for Romanian communities abroad it was expected to soften the process of integration (F04, 2004; M01, 2004; F30, 2006), mainly by facilitating the recognition of qualifications and of driving licensees and by eliminating the travel and residence visas, as well as work permit requirements. These benefits are deemed to represent exactly what Romanians abroad need the most, given the current situation revealed in the forum conversations:

> It appears that anything that comes from outside the EU is worse that if it came from the moon (F04, 2004)

> I am sick every time I leave the country and I am being asked 1001 questions and I spend at least 15 minutes talking to the immigration officers (I don't mean the Romanian ones) and this happens only because we are not in EU. And although I have a perfectly legal visa and everything is ok I still need to give so many explanations… (F24, 2006)

Even though some of the users are aware of the imminent difficulties and pressures on Romania's economy once it joins the EU, they are still very hopeful:

> We should not deceive ourselves that we will all be happy when we are in the EU, but it is our only chance of moving into the light. We have already been aimlessly wandering through the dark for too long so perhaps we finally deserve a place in Europe, even if some of us will have to pay the price (F05, 2006)

The previous quote highlights the perceived importance of EU membership for some of the forum participants: it constitutes a symbol of 'finding their way' and of finally being accepted where they allegedly belong.

It is thus hoped that EU membership will confer Romanians a new status and alleviate the stigma attached to their identity, by amending the public perception of Romanians and of Romania, while, at the same time, significantly improving our vision about ourselves (M60, 2006).

However, these initial feelings about joining the European Union were however significantly challenged by the decision to maintain the employment restrictions for Romanian citizens. As previously discussed in Chapter 8, online Romanians' reactions to this decision have been rather mixed. On the one hand, there are users who accept the decision (in spite of the bewilderment caused) and argue that protesting against it is either futile (as they feel that it is any country's right to impose such restrictions) or, alternatively they fear that their

protest could be interpreted as a sign of ungratefulness for being allowed into the EU. There are also views highlighting that perhaps Romanians deserve these restrictions as the country is not yet truly ready to join the EU.

Nevertheless most online Romanians argue that the situation is humiliating, especially in the light of all the perceived sacrifices and concessions that the country has made in order to get accepted[79]:

> And so, crawling on our knees, we head towards the glorious and saviour EU that keeps treating us like the poor relatives from the country-side… (F01, 2006).

Thus, many of the forum users mention feeling discriminated against and begin questioning the very foundations of the EU, a structure which, in spite of its presumed equality of members, now allows for distinctions between members that are worthy and those that are less so (M03, 2006; M01, 2006). For several participants on the forum the situation is even more frustrating as, historically speaking, they consider that Romania has been a key part of Europe even before others (M01, 2006).

Data indicates that the decision generated an identity crisis among Romanians, which further reinforced Romanians' feelings of inferiority and marginalisation. Forum members describe their feelings in a very rich inventory of expressions:

> we are like from the other corner of EU (M18, 2006).
>
> They place together Romania and Bulgaria with the rest of the uncivilised world which require work permits (M17, 2007);
>
> we are in the second league of the EU (M39, 2008);
>
> we are second hand citizens of the EU (M52, 2009)
>
> we are not equal, we are just with one leg in the EU (M05, F19, 2006);
>
> We are considered a third world country (M05, 2006)
>
> There are different layers of EU members [and we are among the lowest] (M17, 2006; M59, 2007);
>
> We are treated worse than asylum seekers (M59, 2008)

This highlights the fact that many forum users see Romania's EU membership as resembling a limbo state, and this condition, in the view of some of the forum members, still lasts after years of being formally part of the European Union (M15, M59, 2009).

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[79] They mention the Romanian government decisions to give Sidex, the largest iron and steel plan in Romania, to Lakshmi Mittal, who, in turn, sponsored the election campaign for Blair and also the decision to give Petrom, the largest Romanian oil company, to OMV.

Following the initial high hopes and the inevitable disappointment subsequent to the decision, online Romanians seem to slowly begin to evaluate the situation from more angles and thus also identify the benefits of their EU membership. On the one hand, forum members mention free travel, which constituted a problematic issue for Romanians before they joined the EU (M23, 2007). Furthermore, some forum participants also feel that the EU membership constitutes the only hope for modernity in Romania and for the normalisation of the political situation back home (F01, M24, 2009).

The main feelings of discrimination and marginalisation expressed by Romanians on the forum in relation to their position within the EU tend to reflect to a great extent the online Romanians' symbolic constructions of other diasporas in Ireland.

Us and other diasporic groups

Very few references are made on the forum to online Romanians' feelings towards the non-European/non-EU diasporas in Ireland. The scant mentions refer to some of these communities who are praised by the forum members for their ability to maintain their home culture and language by organising Sunday schools for children.

Many comments emerge in relation to diasporas (communities) originating from EU countries. Forum participants identify multiple lines of distinction between public perceptions and attitudes towards the 'old' EU members (joining before 2004) and 'new' EU members (from 2004 onwards), between the ten countries that joined in 2004 and the newest members included in the 2007 enlargement wave, and, last but not least, between the two countries that joined in 2007, namely 'us' and Bulgarians.

Forum participants claim the distinction between the 'old' and the 'new' members of the European Union is mainly constructed upon the dichotomy of East vs. West, hence the perception that not all EU countries are not equally valued. As it already noted in earlier in this chapter, forum users noticed significantly more discrimination and negative comments made against the citizens of the new EU member states as opposed to the old EU members. For some users, this illustrates that the European Union is not a structure that is based on the equality of its members, but rather one that is indicative of the multi-tiered categorisation of countries.

Furthermore, there are multiple indications that even within the group of Eastern European countries included in the 2004 and 2007 EU waves of enlargement, the former are perceived to benefit from a better treatment in Ireland than their 2007 counterparts (M55, 2008; M01, 2008).

Many forum users argue that these countries are better positioned and get a preferential treatment on the labour market. The fact that the nationals of these countries do not require permission to work in Ireland (while Romanian and Bulgarian citizens do) is perceived as unfair competition in the labour market.

The concern over this competition is revealed by the forum users even before Romania got into the EU, and these fears are often formulated in the same pre-formed language used in many media representations of migration in the host societies: they speak of a flooding of the labour market by Polish (and Lithuanians). It is interesting to note that both the settled as well as the prospective Romanian migrants online tend to share these views.

As it emerges from forum data, when online Romanians discuss the presumed preferential treatment of the 2004 EU members, they mainly use the Polish as the key referents (most likely because they make up the great majority of migrants originating from the 10 countries who joined the EU in 2004), and this aspect tends to render the other 2004 EU members' presence in Ireland as invisible.

There are even several mentions on the forum of the strategies the Polish allegedly use in order to take jobs from Romanians. Forum participants thus discuss various rumours about Polish citizens playing tricks on employers and announcing fake labour inspections in order to create fear and thus lead them to 'sack' Romanians who are not working legally (M17, 2009). Furthermore, one forum member also mentions that Irish employers would be forced by the government to fire Romanians working illegally (because they cannot claim unemployment benefit) rather than the Polish (who would be entitled to claim social welfare and who would then become a "burden to the state") (M01, 2008).

The religious element also plays an important role in this respect, as forum users identify a range of perceived benefits of being a Catholic migrant in Ireland. This argument most likely stems from the circumstances surrounding school enrolment policies in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger, when available places in many schools were significantly fewer than the number of applicants. This prompted many of the schools under Catholic patronage to give preference

to Catholic pupils and, this led some of the participants to the forum to conclude that Catholic migrants (and Polish in particular) are preferred in Ireland.

Apart from the schooling situation, one user also sees a connection between the presumed favoured position of the Polish in the Irish society and the fact that the Polish nation "gave the world a Pope" (F05, 2006).

It appears thus that some online Romanians perceive their Orthodox belonging as a significant constraint on the context of available opportunities in Ireland. Thus, one member of the forum compares this religious divide to a new Iron Curtain which divides the old continent (M01, 2006).

There are nevertheless also forum users who do not consider that Romania's position in the EU is in any way influenced by their Orthodox tradition. As one user argues the decision in relation to employment restrictions for Romanians and Bulgarians is most likely "about the money; and money knows no religion" (M41, 2006).

Apart from perceived competition on the labour market, the Polish are mainly seen in a very positive light by online Romanians. Just as in the case of the construction of the Irish 'others', the Polish are constructed in the Romanian collective imagination as a very united people and as a nation that undoubtedly has a better image than ours (M01, 2008; M61, 2009). Furthermore, they are thought to be better at fighting for their rights (M01, 2006; M02, 2008; F01, 2008' M03, 2009), an aspect which might, in their view, explain their better position in the EU structure. From a cultural point of view, the Polish are also seen to be better at maintaining their culture through various events organised by their Embassy and their diasporic institutions and also through their ethnic media production, all of which significantly contribute to their visibility (M03, 2006).

In a similar line, Bulgarians are also believed to have a better image than Romanians in Ireland (F02, 2006) as it is viewed that they are better at protesting for their rights (M01, 2006) and also more well-known for tourism and due to Irish investments in their country (F30, 2006). It is also added that Bulgarians have presumably adopted a more 'vertical' position (i.e. having made fewer compromises and concessions) during their negotiations for EU membership (F05, 2006).

While it emerges that many Romanians feel marginalised and to a certain degree inferior to other EU member states, there also seems to be a parallel trend on the forum as some users perceive themselves as superior to the other diasporas in Ireland. They feel that they are more qualified, thereby assuming that Polish people are all involved in menial jobs, such as, for

example, the constructions sector (M48, 2004). Romanians also consider themselves to be more capable workers (M16, 2004) and more receptive to learning the English language than other diasporas (M41, 2006).

It is also interesting to note that, at the onset of recession in Ireland, when rumours about the Polish leaving were filling the Irish newspapers, several online Romanians rejoiced as they felt that this was the time for them to show that they are more capable workers than the Polish and also more loyal to Ireland (F12, 2007).

Thus, these forum members seem to conclude that Romanians are not worse than others (M16, 2004; F01, 2008) and that every country has its own bad citizens but that it is rather the media that make a difference in how each is perceived (M03, 2007; F03, 2009; F01, 2010).

9.2 'The others' within

The previous section of the chapter explored the key markers in relation to which discourses of identity among online Romanians in Ireland are symbolically imagined. However, diaspora is not a homogenous category and this implies that, apart from the above-mentioned 'external others', there is also a range of "internal others", namely the categories that give diasporic identity its diversity. Therefore several aspects need to be discussed in relation to the perceived lines of distinction within the Romanian community in Ireland.

We are not criminals

On many occasions on the forum, discussions emerge in relation to the presumed criminality of Romanians. It is argued that their image tends to be dominated by those who engage in criminal acts of all kinds and this seems to explain the considerable efforts of online Romanians to dissociate between 'us' and 'them'.

Regardless of whether they referred to the gypsies (for their alleged involvement in stealing and other criminal activities) or to other categories of Romanians that supposedly embarrass them (from a similar point of view), it seems that many online Romanians use 'the criminals' (as a residual category) as a mechanism for coping with the stigma attached to the Romanian identity and also to restore their pride in 'being Romanian'. By targeting and symbolically denouncing those members of the community which users believe to create most of the problems, they are playing a 'justice game' where the 'judges' adopt a morally superior position and distance themselves from the 'Guilty'.

A particular type of criminals is represented by the undocumented migrants. In 2006, when a discussion emerged on the forum aimed at warning those Romanians illegally residing in Ireland of imminent police raids leading to deportations, several interesting reactions emerged.

For some, being 'illegal' in Ireland is an irrelevant aspect, as many Romanians have arrived on the island in more or less similar circumstances:

> For me it doesn't matter how are others, illegal or not, on social welfare or not, or on any other status. The main thing is that they are here to try to make a better and easier life for themselves and this is worth the praise (F26, 2006).

From this perspective, it appears that, as long as migrants are committed to hard work in order to improve the quality of their family's lives, the legal status of their stay becomes of secondary importance.

At the same time, there are also other forum members who are upset by such attempts aimed at helping out undocumented migrants. In their view, these migrants have to help themselves since they have taken upon themselves the risk of 'illegality' (M03, 2006). Furthermore, it is viewed that the warning about the raid has no place on a public discussion forum, as this might turn its regular members into helpers of criminals, thus incriminating them as well

> This forum has also members with the right to stay here in Ireland! And helping these criminals is a criminal law offence – which can eventually be punished. Whoever came here legally has nothing to be scared of! Who didn't… well… then God help them! (M09, 2006)

It is also suggested by some of the forum members that undocumented migrants have knowingly chosen their path and that since they are happy with the benefits associated to being undocumented, they should also experience the inherent risks. Hence, they are not deemed as victims and therefore do not need to be helped:

> […] they should not be helped as sometimes they mock the ones working legally due to the fact that they are being paid less [than those working in the black economy] - I have waited for one year and a half to be able to come to Ireland legally […] I have left my wife and kid at home […] and I work at a company which for the last few years had serious problems, and this affects us financially. I don't want to work in the black economy because I want to get the residence […] I could have found a full time job paying good money [in the black market], but I wanted to have a legal status. I have an acquaintance here that is illegal and was saying to me ironically: <<you with your work permits have your hands tied and you can't do anything, you depend on them and you don't even have the time to make money>>. I could have paid 2000 EUR or whatever to get fake papers for my family to come here. But I preferred to go on the legal route and apply for family reunification visa. So whoever entered this country illegally should bear the consequences, and they should not complain about the fact that they are being deported (M53, 2006).

Thus, the alleged strategy of the undocumented migrants to fast-forward their way in order to achieve higher financial gains is sanctioned by other forum users who have preferred the difficult and lengthy path of legal migration. They feel moral superiority towards their illegal co-nationals and occasionally refuse answering their queries:

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> If you were so smart to get to Ireland without a passport… then I'm pretty sure you don't need our advice to manage further… I don't see why they should revoke your deportation orders. [...] What you did in order to enter Ireland is… illegal. Shocking, isn't it? You have no excuse and neither do any of those that don't respect the law. Laws are not made so that we can slalom around them […] Maybe for some of the members of the Romanian community here in Ireland this is a normal thing […] So I would like to give you a new perspective over things: it is not normal to go against the law […] (M67, 2007)

While the general discourse seems to point towards a distancing from such members of the Romanian community, there are also users who feel that none of us are so pure as to cast the first stone (M05, 2006; M02, 2007; M67, 2007). This argument seems be specific to those online Romanians who have experienced an undocumented status in the past and who accept that it may be just a transient stage in the migrants' lives in the host country, thus bearing no indication of their refusal to integrate.

A different discourse is adopted in relation to those who have the right to stay in Ireland, but not the right to work, a situation which leads some of them to engage in illegal work. In this situation it appears that the connotations of criminality associated with their illegal involvement in the labour market are removed. As one user points out, if these migrants are working hard, then it is irrelevant whether they are legally entitled to engage in work or not (F23, 2004). This belief is further reinforced by a perception that Irish employers are fully aware of this situation but rather use Romanian migrants because of their quality and skills, even if that means employing them illegally (F11, 2004).

The case of those members of the Romanian community in Ireland who engage in abuses of the welfare system (by claiming benefits while at the same time engaging in illegal work) is also discussed. It is generally viewed that such acts require legal responsibility and punishment (M16, 2006; M17, 2006). Furthermore, it is suggested that this type of practice may be interpreted as a sign of the refusal to integrate in the new country.

> [Cheating on the system] is a solution if you don't want to live the rest of your life here, if you want to get some money and return to Romania. Because otherwise how about pension, the trust of the bank when you want to apply for mortgage, your lack of references on your CV and the list may go on (M41, 2006).

This point of view is shared by other members of the forum who feel that, by not claiming social welfare and legally engaging in work, one may gain access to many other things besides an income, namely stable employment, integration and access to credit (M16, 2006).

Data also indicates that in some cases, those that are in some respects 'illegal' in the host country are being denied by their claims to Romanianness by others. Thus when one forum member claimed that in spite of working on fake papers he never concealed his true (Romanian) nationality, another forum member reacts:

> […] somewhere on this forum, you mentioned that you and your wife do not have Romanian papers, nothing to indicate that you are Romanian… then you come here and you tell us how you listen to 'our' music without bothering what the neighbours think. Doesn't this sound like hypocrisy to you? (F15, 2004)

Others manifest a similar tendency to distance themselves from those working on fake passports (F05, 2005; M09, F02, 2006). It emerges thus that for many of the participants who have never found themselves in a similar situation, it is simply unacceptable to be part of the same category as the 'illegals', hence the strong desire to trace a line of separation between themselves and those symbolically blemished by their involvement in illegalities.

From this point of view, the issue of media representations is very important and several forum users cannot understand media's preference (or at times 'obsession') for representing 'them' ('the illegals') more than 'us' (the deserving members of the Romanian community). The associations between 'us' and 'them' in the media discourse thus contribute to the negative connotations of Romanian identity in public opinion, which further leads to embarrassment and stigma for many online Romanians

> the illegals are on their own and we should not associate with them, rather we should be proud of the accomplishments of the legal ones and not give the impression on TV that we are all asking for social welfare (F02, 2008).

Consequently it emerges that even the category of 'illegals' is a heterogeneous one as some of their acts seem to be more socially accepted than others. However, in spite of the occasional calls for accepting the 'illegals' as part of 'us' based on the fact that no one is ever so pure as to cast the first stone, the general tendency seems to indicate a strong desire to exclude them from the diasporic identity construction.

Up or further down the ladder – social class distinctions among Romanians in Ireland

References to social class have often been brought up for discussion on the forum, as it constitutes an inherent part of most categorisations made by online Romanians in relation to the composition of the Romanian diaspora in Ireland.

Social class is sometimes invoked in an attempt to explain why experiences of discrimination and racism are encountered by some Romanians and not (so often) by others. It is suggested that such negative experiences in the host society could, to a certain degree, be avoided by being positioned higher on the social ladder and/or by interacting with natives that are also similarly positioned.

There is no clear definition of social class, however it appears that 'low class' is often defined in relation to a boorish attitude (F01, 2008; M13, 2008), a characteristic which is exemplified by forum members with reference to those Romanians who stand up before the plane comes to a stand-still, those who skip the taxi queue at the airport, and those who manifest disrespect towards nature.

At the same time, there are mentions in relation to the level of education (M08, M13, 2009) and to the use of the Romanian language. It is thus argued that accent and colourful language particularly indicate belonging to the 'low class' (F07, 2008; M24, 2009). While no clarifications are made in relation to what a low-class accent is, these mentions may signal the implicit assumption that those who originate from particular regions of Romania (e.g. Moldova[80]) are positioned lower down the social ladder.

The work sector is also an important indicator of class as participants differentiate between menial jobs (e.g. working in the construction or the security industry) and those working in IT or other very qualified positions (M03, 2009; M08, 2007). However, while for some of the forum members those working in low-prestige jobs are the target of mockery, for others they are the ideal people to meet and they are people that you can count on

> The truth is that many Romanians here jumped from the tail of the cow in a long forgotten village straight onto the scaffolds of Ireland where they are contributing hard to Ireland's future [sarcastic tone]. So these wide-necked guys with their 0-level haircut and their thick fingers they can't even type […] I met such

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[80] The (Romanian) Moldovan accent is probably the most ridiculed accent in a range of oral jokes and also in many entertainment shows.

a specimen […] he had a PC at home but he bought it from Tesco of course […] he probably just bought it because it looked good in the living room or just to make his scaffold colleagues envious (M09, 2007)

I would always prefer to go out for a beer with those that work on a building site because they are hard-working men and they have much more commonsense […] So what if they are not so educated as you expect them to be? Surely they are not even trying to claim that they have the same level of 'education' as you do. Who would bother to put tiles in your house if all of them would work in the same office as you do and they would wear a white shirt? (M13, 2007)

Furthermore, musical taste is also discussed in connection to social class and those Romanians that listen to manele[81] (M03, 2006) are mainly categorised as low class. This may also be seen as closely related to the contempt expressed by some of the users of the forum in relation to gypsy cultural products (as discussed in a previous section of this chapter). Others, on the other hand, feel superior simply because they listen to another kind of music (not specified), as opposed to the current pop artists (F02, 2007).

Various users point to the fact that bragging about one's success abroad (in particular in relation to their financial achievements) is perceived as an indication of low social class (M41, 2006; M09, 2006). They include in this category those that buy expensive cars and other luxury products to show off their wealth upon their return to the homeland.

Last but not least, the irony of the forum users is also directed towards those who aim to imitate the behaviours and hobbies of the middle/upper classes, but who clearly show signs of their amateurism in this respect (e.g. those who buy their ski suits from Lidl or Aldi) (M13, 2008). Their alleged desire to copy a behaviour that is not specific to their class renders them vulnerable to ridicule.

The issue of social class also raises multiple questions about whether the Romanian Community of Ireland is indeed representative of all Romanians in Ireland.

I think that you should not be surprised if the elite of Romanians in Ireland will completely ignore you. From all the activities that you mention that you are doing for Romanians here, many are just lame […] and they are addressed to some nobodies, 'small consumers', the 'little' persons with no visas, who can't write and can't speak, they have no clue about the legislation, they came here pretending that they were victims back home and they have constantly problems with the law here. You will be surprised to

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[81] Gypsy party music

find out that there is another category of Romanians here too, those that have Master Degrees and PhDs, those that always had valid visas and very well-paid jobs, they are working exactly in their area of specialisation, they knew the language [English] before they even got here, they visit other countries [than Romania] when they go on holidays, they have the same rights like the Irish do and they are aware of this […] So, yes it is normal that you have more activities for the former category, but still, the second category is the one that makes all the difference in the eyes of the Irish […] but this category needs no one to speak on their behalf, especially some mediocre like you (M08, 2005).

This citation also reveals the strong connection between issues related to social class and those mentioned in the previous section in relation to the involvement in 'illegal' activities (e.g. having no valid visas, or those in conflict with the law). Moreover, it is also articulated that those Romanians situated higher up the social ladder may not even need a diasporic institution to speak on their behalf, as their positive deeds and their achievements seem to speak for themselves.

The issue of social class is also discussed in connection with media representations. While it is argued that 'the true values' need more exposure in the media if the Romanian image is to change for the better, there are also users arguing that elites generally refuse to appear in the media as they desire to keep their anonymity (M01, 2007). The elites are thus indirectly accused of a lack of patriotism for refusing to help in the construction of a more positive image of Romanians. Another forum member however feels that while valuable members of the community are fairly easy to recognise due to their accomplishments, their aim is not to try by all means to stand out from the crowd, hence their refusal to become subjects of media attention (M08, 2007). Thus, their contribution in raising the profile of the Romanian community in Ireland does not have to be sought in their involvement in the community organisation, participating to community events or becoming spokes-persons for the community. Their role is rather indirect as they raise the profile of the community through their everyday actions.

Discussion and conclusions

This chapter highlighted several important findings in relation to how members of the Romanian diaspora living in Ireland negotiate symbolic identity spaces in relation to 'the Others'. It emerged that while some constitute negative referents in online Romanians' identity discourses, others represent for forum members models to follow. Also, at times, participants express their feelings of inferiority in relation to some of 'the Other' groups and these tend to reinforce the stigma which many forum users feel attached to the label of 'Romanian'. There are also contexts where discourses of superiority prevail as online Romanians engage in several strategies which help them restore their pride in their national belonging.

Coping with the rather negative thoughts and feelings about their identity as well as the pessimistic view about any future solutions to improve the image of Romanians, the diaspora has often adopted a strategy based on targeting and denouncing those members of the community which the users believe to create most of the problems. One example of this situation is the relation between the Romanian diaspora and the gypsy group which many of the forum users deem as the main culprits for their stigmatised identity. Similar negative attitudes have been directed towards groups of Romanians coming from poorer parts of the country and also towards 'the criminals' (a residual category where 'dirt' is symbolically attributed).

This study confirmed the findings of Trandafoiu (2009) and Frese (forthcoming) who identify a strong anti-gypsy tone in Romanian migrants' discourses. However, in relation to identity, this study shows that gypsies become of utmost importance, as this group seems to act (in the Romanian imaginary) as the common enemy which gives unity to their identity discourses.

While these groups constitute mainly negative referents in their identity discourses, there are also various markers of identity which are infused with positive values and which are seen by many forum members as models to follow.

Romanians' fascination with 'the Occident' has deep roots in the Communist regime when civilisation, progress and 'hope' was equated with 'the West', and this has been confirmed by several recent studies (EC, 2001; Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; Frese, forthcoming). The same feelings persist today, being particularly reinforced by a perception that the East of Europe is the target of multiple negative stereotypes and associations in public opinion. Thus,

Romanians feel that not only do they have to assume the 'shame' for being Romanian, but also the equally demeaning one: Eastern Europeanness.

Thus, the West/East dichotomy becomes a synonym for the opposition between pride (and desire to belong) and stigma. This interplay between pride and shame (superiority and inferiority) can also be noted in relation to how Romanians define themselves in relation to Europe. Thus while there is agreement on the fact that, from a geographical point of view, they are indeed Europeans, some Romanians on the forum also feel that Romania occupies a marginal position in Europe. Hence inferiority emerges as they feel that they do not yet belong to Europe understood in a symbolic sense, i.e. as a space of "civilisation".

The feeling of inferiority Romanians feel about their identities persists even in the references that Romanians make in relation to other diasporic communities. In their view, others are better at maintaining their language and culture. They are also perceived to be more united and more vocal about their rights (Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; Trandafoiu, 2009).

Several studies speak of a difficulty for Romanians in interacting with other minorities (Rostaș and Stoica, 2006; Cinpoeș, 2009). While this study has found some support for this, online Romanians seem to be otherwise admiring of many of these diasporas in Ireland for reasons which include their outstanding community mobilisation and the organisation of Sunday schools for children.

Forum members not only trace boundaries between themselves and 'the others', but also trace the lines of differentiation between various categories of Romanian migrants in Ireland. From this perspective, their legal status emerges as a very important aspect as online Romanians strive to construct their image and their collective identity apart from what 'the criminals' represent in the public eyes.

The impact of social class (which has been confirmed by other studies among which Bobek (2009), Scully (2009) and Ogan (2001)) also plays a crucial role for the Romanian community in Ireland, in particular in relation to media representation. The attempt by forum members to map out the possible 'signs' of social class, leave us with a broad spectrum of aspects ranging from level of education and profession, to elements of behaviour, but also to more intricate aspects such as musical tastes and use of language.

The study also confirmed the fact that while the negotiations of the borders between these groups are essential for defining the group's identity, borders are not fixed or frozen in time. For example, the optimism when

Romania was preparing its candidacy to become an EU member has given way to feelings of inferiority and rejection. What can be noticed however is an emerging trend where the forum members seem to accept the fact that all [EU] countries have good and bad citizens ("all forests have dried stumps"). Moreover they agree that in order to be a respected European nation they have to respect themselves and convince all the others to respect them as well. And this needs to be a process they all participate to as nobody will fight this battle for them.

Conclusions

This study endeavoured to contribute significantly to the emerging body of scholarship pertaining to the study of ethnic/diasporic/migrant identities, by engaging with a theoretical approach that has yet been insufficiently explored empirically (namely the boundary perspective proposed by Barth (1969) and further developed by Bauman (1990) and other theorists); by applying an innovative methodology that continues the efforts by scholars such as Hine (2001, 2008) and Kozinets (2010) and enriches the ethnographic approach to online communities; and, last but not least, by engaging with a (diasporic) community that has yet not received the adequate academic attention that it deserves.

Firstly, in an attempt to surpass the main challenges associated to the measurement of (diasporic) identities in empirical research, I chose to follow in the footsteps of the advocates for an 'anthropology of the borders' and hence focus on the intense negotiation of symbolic identity boundaries between 'us' and 'the others'. On the one hand, this enabled a shift from understanding identity as a set of essentialising cultural features, to a perspective that encompasses an intricate web of links and references to 'the others'. On the other hand, by focusing on the relational component of identity, the dynamics of identity construction became evident and easier to capture in the analysis.

In the case of online Romanians in Ireland, this boundary-approach was key for uncovering the complex process of their collective identity negotiation. Multiple 'others' emerged as crucial referents for their identity discourses as forum members defined their (diasporic) identities beyond the home/host dimension and in relation (or, at times, in opposition) to being a gypsy, being part of Europe and the European Union, being from 'the East' or 'the West', being a 'low class' or part of the elite.

Media were assigned a decisive role by forum members in the construction and renegotiation of their identities. It was argued that, the negative associations around the label of 'Romanian' and the stigma associated to it are, to a great extent, consequences of the demonising intentions (and effects) of media representations of Romania and Romanians in both the foreign and the homeland media, but also, surprisingly, in the diasporic media.

Furthermore, it emerged that not only their self-perceptions, but also their characterisations of 'the others' were strongly influenced by the media discourse. This was mainly the case in the often negative comments towards gypsies as well as some of the other diasporic groups in Ireland. On these occasions, online Romanians appeared to adopt the pre-formed language of (new) racism and discrimination present in the majority of media articles centred on the issue of migration in society.

However, media were not exclusively referred to by the forum participants as the sources of negative characterisations of themselves and 'the others'. Online Romanians also pointed to the vital role that media play in the project of reconstruction of their national and diasporic identities. It was thus argued that while media are to blame for their image and their public perception, they also represent the 'tools' through which Romanians can uplift their sense of belonging by re-building their image on a foundation that includes more positive elements of identification.

Thus, the media represented for Romanians in Ireland more than sources of (stigmatising) content, but also an important medium through which they collectively took part in the process of identity construction. In this perspective, 'the media' referred more to 'the medium' through which their identities are brought into the public space and negotiated. In this respect, the relevance of the forum for Romanians in Ireland was very high, considering the lack of other significant forms of diasporic participation at that moment (e.g. diasporic media production, a diasporic community centre, or, generally speaking, other diasporic meeting spaces).

The RCI online discussion forum represented the main platform of interaction of Romanians in Ireland, the public space where they came together and discussed various issues ranging from day-to-day business to complex topics such as integration, the future of their homeland or their (diasporic) identities.

By engaging in a study of the online, this research contributed to the yet emerging trend of researching 'virtual' communities. It followed the model of ethnographic research as it closely observed and participated in the life of this online community for a long period of time (2007-2011)[82]. This type of approach presents a significant potential for the social research as it allows for an in-depth understanding of diasporic identities in the context in which they are produced

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[82] Data collected covers the period 2004-2010.

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and negotiated, rather than separated from the web of underlying meanings that shape a collective identity.

Several drawbacks of focusing on the 'online' (as opposed to the 'traditional' route of face-to-face interviews) emerged. For example, given the desire for anonymity of some of the forum users, only a limited amount of correlations could be drawn between their socio-demographic profile and their expressed views. Furthermore, by engaging in an analysis of a pre-determined set of data, this research could not explore to the desired depth several interesting aspects which spawned from data (e.g. the role of social class and religion as key referents in their identity discourses).

Nevertheless, there are downsides inherent to any research methodology, as there can be no single approach or method that caters for all intricacies of a study of identity. Thus, the value of the methodology employed by this research needs to be seen in relation to its attempt to take a further step towards understanding diasporic identities as dynamic and relational processes, rather than in connection to a presupposed desire to mend all the challenges of identity research.

Furthermore, the newly emerging portal page of the RCI as well as the recently constructed Facebook profiles of the Romanian diasporic newspaper *Actualitatea IRL* and of the RCI gather a significant (and yet increasing) number of 'likes' and 'friends'[83]. This trend points to the importance of 'the online' for Romanians in Ireland and also to a continuing diasporic expansion in the 'virtual' space. It also seems to suggest that further research is needed in this direction in order to comprehend the various other types of online manifestations of Romanian diasporas.

Apart from the theoretical and methodological contributions to the existing literature which were discussed so far, this study also aimed to contribute to the emerging scholarship on Romanian migration. Very little was known about Romanian communities abroad, as the focus of Romanian migration researchers was mainly geared towards the investigation of the circumstances of emigrants' departure/ or return to the homeland. Thus, the trend of researching Romanian migrant communities at the point of destination is only now beginning to emerge. Furthermore, in relation to the Romanian diasporic identities, there was very little existing literature, in spite of the appetite

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[83] Actualitatea IRL Facebook's profile has 1270 friends [05.02.2012] and the Romanian Community of Ireland's recently created Facebook page already counts 462 'likes'. These figures are significantly higher that the ones recorded only two months before [06.12.2011] presented in Chapter 4 – Background to the Case Study: 1072 friends and, respectively, 301 likes.

for debate that the topic of 'who they are' incites at the social level. Thus, this study provides the basis for future studies in this direction by using the case study of online Romanians in Ireland and producing a detailed account of their processes of identity negotiation and the meanings that they associate to these identities.

The 'home' and the 'host' have often been given foremost attention in studies of diasporic identifications. These two dimensions also played a key role for online Romanians, as they constructed their identities based on their belonging to both the homeland and to their 'adoptive' country. Firstly, the strong and alternating feelings of love and hate for the motherland showed that, in spite of their disappointment with the direction in which the country is heading, they were still very deeply concerned about its fate. However feelings of nostalgia, love and pride for their country were also present in the discourse and this indicated that, by migrating, many forum users did not simply put their national identities 'on hold'.

Secondly, their feelings and attitudes towards the host community also alternated between the discourse of praise for their country of destination and the natives (for their warm welcoming and for the opportunities available) and the instances when their discourse acquired a negative tonality due to their perception that their contribution to Ireland had not been fully recognised.

Thus findings highlighted the fact that, by being able to symbolically move between 'here' and 'there', by consuming media (and not only) products from both the homeland and the host society, by desiring to belong to both locations and at times, feeling rejected by both, Romanians on the forum articulate a transnational, hybrid identity.

In addition, multiple other identity markers emerged from the forum discussions and this illustrates that the alleged home-host opposition in the diasporic discourse may be interpreted as a rather simplified way of looking at migrants' belonging. In the case of online Romanians in Ireland this study finds evidence of various referents including, among others, ethnic and diasporic groups and geographical and geopolitical entities.

One of the most powerful references which seemed to dominate discussions on the forum was the Romanian relation with the gypsies. A broadly negative discourse could be noted mainly due to the fact that online Romanians see the gypsies as mainly culpable for 'our' perceived negative image and the stigma attached to 'being Romanian'. It was however interesting to note that while the users' attitudes towards the gypsies seem rather negative and they

stated their desire for more clearly traced lines of distinction between 'us' and 'them', it appeared that, at the same time, this ethnic group also provides an element of unity in the identity discourse of Romanians on the forum.

Finally, the attribute of 'diasporic' deserves some consideration at this stage. Starting off in the very early stages of this PhD research with a desire to study Romanians in Ireland, I encountered in this endeavour, a very active community of Romanians that was centred around an online forum. Many questions emerged then in relation to the existing connections between this particular community and the wider community of Romanians in Ireland: are they similar? Is this online community diasporic?

An in-depth exploration of the profiles of the forum members showed that no generalisations could routinely be made to the entire Romanian diaspora in Ireland as it became clear that not all groups and categories of Romanians in Ireland were equally represented online. For example, in spite of some very active women-members of the forum, they still seemed to be underrepresented in the ranks of the active forum members. At the same time, gypsies and very young migrants (19-25 years) were almost absent from the forum.

In the effort to determine the position of this online community in relation to the wider community of Romanians in Ireland, I took note of the forum members' very own definitions of themselves. It emerged that they imagined themselves as rather different from the 'offline' side of the Romanian community in Ireland. Social class emerged as a key identity marker from this perspective as forum members often portrayed themselves as the elite part of the community: they saw themselves as more educated, more in control of their destiny and of the 'Romanian project' (namely the restoration of their homeland and the reconstruction of the image of Romanianness on more positive values). Thus, class becomes an inherent part of their diasporic identity discourse of this online group. Furthermore, it emerged that the perceived difficulties of precisely the Romanian elites to achieve coverage in the media of both the homeland and of the host country eventually 'pushed' them to search for a 'voice' online. Hence, the forum provided the ideal environment where they could find their much needed public sphericule.

Benchmarking this online community against Safran's (1991) discussion of the defining elements of a diaspora clearly shows that, even if it does not represent the mirror image of all Romanians in Ireland, this online community of Romanians nevertheless represent a diasporic community. Online Romanians underwent dispersal from the homeland (even though it was not experienced at

the same traumatic level of the 'classic' diasporas). Furthermore, they showed evidence of a collective memory and vision of their homeland as they try to propose solutions for improving the Romanian image abroad. Last but not least, online Romanians developed consciousness surrounding their group as a diasporic community. In addition to these aspects, transnational belonging, an element which was rather ignored in Safran's account of the features that define a diaspora, emerged as an essential characteristic of Romanians online.

In conclusion, this thesis presented an in-depth account of the online life of a diasporic community. By doing so, it highlighted the process of construction and negotiation of their collective identities (as distinct from 'others') through their use of media as both sources of their public image and identity, and as a tool, a medium through which these images may be challenged and renegotiated. Thus, re-iterating the words of one of the forum users, "it is media that make us who we are and also who we want to be".

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