

“MY HOME”. THE CASE OF TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

IULIA-ELENA HOSSU*

ABSTRACT: *The aim of this paper is to trace how representations of home were affected by the transnational family as a new mode of living. Starting from this question, the study first maps out the significance of the home in the collective imaginary of Romanian society by providing a review of the most relevant literature. In the second part I will illustrate the significance of the home in the imaginary of those already living a transnational existence, starting from their representations of home. The final part of the paper will*

focus more narrowly on how these representations change in the case of the latest migration wave, accompanied by the redefining of individual identity.

This research is based on a qualitative analysis of data obtained from audio and video interviews with members of the community of Romanian migrants to Belgium.

KEYWORDS: *home, identity, transnational families, Romanian migrants*

HOME...

*I am in the field with my research partner Călin. This is my first field research for this project, and the location is a village in northern Romania, in a county with a high migration rate (Bistrița-Năsăud). For almost a week, going into people's homes, I listened to many migration stories. Virtually every household has at least one member who lives abroad. This time we meet an elderly couple whose all three children live abroad. They speak to them when they can and have the time to go down the hill, in the valley, where there is an Internet connection that they can use to talk to them online. Despite that, the two are very cheerful, they make many jokes, and they seem to be quite at ease with the situation. They spend their time doing work around their own house, but also around their children's houses, each of the three having built his or her own house as they envisage to come back home one day to live in them. After the interview, the woman sees us off and gives us a tour of each house insisting that we should take pictures. She is proud of her children's achievements, how each of them has his or her own house, including the youngest who is not even married yet. As we say goodbye, the woman looks nostalgically into our eyes and says: "All I want now is that my children come back **home**."*

The woman's line stayed with me for a while and made me wonder what *home* means for those who have been living in another country for a few years and who have by now at least two homes – one here, in their home country, their parents' house or the house that they built or bought for themselves for their eventual return, and the other one, in the host country, where they currently live.

I became interested in the meaning of *home* and how it connects to the concept of identity in the context of writing my PhD thesis on marriage and kinship in Romania, which confirmed that the two are deeply connected (Hossu 2010). Therefore, in the first part of my paper I will focus on the significance of the term *home* for the collective imaginary of Romanian society and on how identity and *home* define

* Researcher, Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities, Romania, Cluj Napoca. E-mail: iulia_hossu@yahoo.com

each other. In the second part I will illustrate the significance of the *home* in the imaginary of those already living a transnational existence, starting from their representations of *home*. The final part of the paper will focus more narrowly on how these representations change in the case of the latest migration wave, accompanied by the redefining of individual identity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this paper is to trace *how representations of home were affected by the transnational family as a new mode of living*. Starting from this question, the study first maps out the significance of the home in the collective imaginary of Romanian society by providing a review of the most relevant literature. Simultaneously, I will focus on how the concept maintains an important place in the emigrants' representations by trying to answer the question: What does *home* mean for the Romanian migrants to Belgium? To articulate how *identity* and *home* intertwine, I will trace the extent to which the two concepts restructure and redefine each other.

DATA, SITES AND METHODS

This research is based on a qualitative analysis of data obtained from audio and video interviews with members of the community of Romanian migrants to Belgium. Our respondents were Romanian migrants, generally well integrated in the receiving society, i.e. they had non-marginal social statuses. The structure of the sample is the result of the method used to select our interviewees, i.e. the snowball method. The respondent sample thus turned out to be highly qualified migrants, with ages between 28 and 45, an university education, and working in the professions for which they were trained.¹ Their answers reflect how views of *home* have changed, how they have become blurred and hybridized, moving away from a physical representation and closer to an affective non-localized one. Even under these circumstances, in the case of migrants to Belgium, the field material shows that the underlying connection between *home* and *identity* is maintained – as observed also by Heidi Armbruster in the case of Christian Syrian women who migrated to Turkey and Germany (2002: 17).

The analysis of interviews was complemented by a review of the literature (mostly Romanian ethnographic work), with a focus on the representation of the home in the collective imaginary of Romanian society. I use a diachronic approach to the concept of *home* in order to capture the change in attitudes as a result of the migration process. Migration – in conjunction with status, values, behaviors – has influenced, divided, and transformed the representation of *home*.

ARGUMENT

Shelley Mallett wrote: “Briefly, how home is and has been defined at any given time depends upon ‘specification of locus and extent’ and the broader historical and social context” (2004: 84). Firstly, this proposition led me to understand that any attempt at defining how Romanian immigrants represent the concept of *home* must take into account the history and the context of the concept’s representation in the home country. Secondly, my research led me to realize that, although there is a vast literature on how the notion of *home* was shaped and reshaped in various migration contexts (Najde and Koser 2002; Walsh

¹ For a discussion of highly qualified migrants, see for the Polish case *Janusz Hryniewicz, Bohdan Jałowiecki, Agnieszka Mync: The Brain Drain from Sciences and Universities in Poland 1994–1996*) and for the Romanian case *Al patrulea val: migrația creierelor pe ruta România-Occident [The Forth Wave: the Brain Drain on the Route Romania-Western Countries]* Alexe, Iris (ed)/ Ulrich, Louis/ Stănciugelu, Ștefan/ Mihăilă, Viorel/ Bojincă, Marian; although the latter discusses the migration of “white coats” (Romanian medical doctors), it can be extended to other categories of professionals (IT specialists, engineers, etc.).

2006; Parutis 2011; Walsh and Näre 2016), there was no readily available work that discussed this issue in the case of Romanian migrants.

Home (the physical space) is a major component of identity as conceived by the majority of the Romanian population. In 2011, Romania came first in terms of home ownership in Europe, with 96.1% of the population owning their homes (Eurostat 2014). The sociocultural history of this fact goes very far back, rooted in the traditions and practices of people who have lived in this area.

There are many Romanian ethnographic studies that emphasize both the significance of the *home* in people’s social representations and how *home* intertwines with the concept of identity. Many Romanian customs and traditions are connected to the physical space of home. Monica Budiş (1998) writes an entire book on the microcosm of the household, among others, tracing the details of the fundamental relationship between home as household and the whole set of practices that make up the very structure of social life in Romanian traditional communities. Another host of important Romanian ethnographers (Simion Florea-Marian 1995; Elena Niculiţă-Voronca 1998; Ion Ghinoiu 2002; Ion Taloş 2001 etc.) regard the fundamental connection between the practice and customs of Romanian traditional communities and the household as inherent. The first studies of Romanian kinship describe the exact and unbreachable practices related to this place, with *home* being virtually synonymous with the *land* on which it is built and the *family* that lives in it.² Important Romanian ethnographers have dedicated seminal works to the system of inheritance of the parental home and of the land belonging to the household (Stahl 1959).

Until recently, according to Romanian practices and sociocultural representations, the notion of family meant marriage, having children, and (ideally) owning a house. To a large extent, this view of family life developed from the Romanian traditional patriarchal model, model that the socialist regime, despite their apparent efforts to dismantle it, actually strengthened by what has become to be known in the literature as the “triple burden” of the woman (see Gal and Kligman 2000). Similarly to other Eastern European countries, as discussed by Violetta Parutis (2011) among others, Romanians maintained this behavioral pattern even after the fall of communism. Current surveys show that family comes first when Romanians are asked about values. This is the same for Poland, with surveys from 2005 showing that family values ranked first in the people’s preferences, as well as a markedly family-centered behavior. To account for this, the restriction of freedom by the communist regimes and their attempts to take over control of people’s private lives were invoked (Parutis 2011: 271).

Driven by their trust in these values and the poor economic situation, a large share of the Romanian young population chose to emigrate in the early 1990s. Romania is by no means a singular case on the migration map – at least not as concerns the first waves of migration. We find a similar pattern in Vullnetari’s discussion of the Albanian case (2016: 38–49). At present, however, migration does not affect only the young population but people across social, age, and income categories. In other words, to belong to a transnational family has become almost the norm; it is no longer the exception. This socio-cultural context has changed people’s social representations and their conceptions of *home*. What fifty years of communism could not change – namely, the structure, representations and the definition of family –, ten years of intensive Romanian migration managed to change rapidly.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF HOME IN ROMANIAN SOCIETY

In the fifteen years I have spent doing fieldwork in Romania, my respondents asked me the following three questions with almost clockwork regularity, in the same order: What family do you belong to?

² While in English *home* is both a noun and an adverb, two different words are used in Romanian: (1) *casă* (countable noun), a very general term for the actual, physical building, in which anyone can live, not only a family; and (2) *acasă* (adverb) which has the very specific meaning of ‘one’s home’ and also the figurative meaning of ‘homeland’ or even ‘family’ (see below for a detailed discussion of the meanings of the word *home* in Romanian).

(*De-a cui ești?*); Are you married? (*Ești căsătorită?*); Do you own a house? (*Ai casă?*). My respondents' questions reflect how all these terms relate to each other – the *family* (in this case, one's family name), *belonging* (for women, marital status seems to matter even more), and the *home*. In broad terms, according to Romanian social representations, a person's identity is weaved around these components. *Home* is generally understood as that private space where one spends half of their existence. One belongs to a *home* the way one belongs to the family associated to that home. Ultimately, the *home* one lives in is perceived as a microcosm of the external macroworld. Beginning in the early years of life, the *home* one belongs to shapes one's position and status in the community. *Home* is the external projection of the entire family and a material manifestation of the identity of those living inside. This is maybe most visible in Romanian rural communities where the worth of a family is evaluated based on the size and displayed wealth of their home and on how well they tend to it. By being associated with a particular *home*, we are invested with symbolic capital – which can be positive or negative. According to community (external) representations, the *home* is an integral part of the image of family and kin identity. It is the center of all family and social relations. For instance, the Romanian socialist state nationalized the houses of old upper-class families, because these were representative of a social class which the communist regime wanted to marginalize, even to remove all together. This process had a major impact on family cohesion in that it attempted to destroy family identity and status not so much in material terms as symbolically. When a family lost their home, around which they had built an entire social network and the events that created and strengthened that social network, they lost, one by one, their members and, with them, their internal cohesion. Most members found alternative ways to survive and the family slowly fell apart. This phenomenon occurred both in urban and rural areas, with the state seizing first of all the houses and the land owned by the families. Entire families, with long histories, were faced with losing their cohesion and having to migrate to various faraway parts of the country as one of that era's policies was to gradually break up these upper-class families and their identities.

Tellingly enough, it is currently impossible to obtain a Romanian ID card unless one has a domicile. To have a domicile, one needs to be either the owner or a tenant of the house; or, the third option, a family member or a friend needs to register you as resident at their address (in the last two cases you receive a residence visa). In other words, if one is not a homeowner or a tenant, things become very complicated from an administrative point of view given the high level of interdependency between the domicile (one's home) and the issue of an ID card. These practices date back to the communist era when the state came up with particularly restrictive rules to limit and to control the citizens' movement. This policy was aimed particularly at restricting free movement into big cities, and Romanians even developed the strategy of 'marrying into' the big cities and thus obtaining the desired ID card.³

One of the oldest Romanian literary works (Ureche [1642–1647] 1955: 237) notes the equivalence of the words *home* and *family*, while the main study of Romanian kinship terminology (Scurtu 1966: 302–303) places the word *home* in the semantic field of the family.

According to the Etymological Dictionary of Romanian Language (*Dicționarul etimologic al limbii române*), the term *casă* (home or house⁴) has many uses, with more than half of them being basic meanings connected with *family* and implicitly with the notion of identity. The meanings that relate the *home* to the *family* are: housing, family house, family, married couple, lineage, aristocratic family, residence

³ For a better illustration, I recommend an excellent Romanian comedy film from the socialist era, *Buletin de București* (Bucharest ID Card), directed by Virgil Calotescu, 1983, which shows a Romanian university graduate – a non-resident of Bucharest – who opts for a sham marriage to a taxi driver – who eventually turns out to be a veterinarian – for the sole purpose of being able to keep living in Bucharest. As already mentioned, this was not something unheard of in socialist Romania.

A continuation of this practice is to be found in the strategies of Romanians who wish to become citizens of non-European countries such as the US.

⁴ See Footnote 2 above.

(Ciorănescu 2009). Further, some of the derivatives of *casă* illustrate concepts pertaining to the sphere of the family. The word *căsătorie* (marriage) itself is a derivative of *casă*, as well as other terms such as *casnic* (domestic) referring to the private sphere of the family, one of the major dimensions of individual identity.

The strong correlation in the social actors’ discourses between *home* and *family*, sometimes to the extent of the two terms’ being used interchangeably, becomes apparent in everyday phrases. A few such examples are: *merg la casa mea* (I set up my own home), *home* being synonymous with *family* here; *să-l văd la casa lui* (to see him settled in his own home), once again synonymous with *family*, not just a different residence; *fac casă bună împreună* (literally, they make a good home together), meaning that the two partners are a good match and they form a proper family according to social standards; *e bărbat/femeie de casă* (he/she is a good homemaker), meaning that the person regardless of the gender is a family person, who cares about the family, the family home; *are casă mare* (literally, he/she has a big home), used in everyday language to refer to a person who has many children, i.e. to the size of the family and not so much to the size of the actual house. Both the large number of phrases used in everyday language to refer to the family and home and the way the two terms seem to be interchangeable reflect the strong link between them as perceived in everyday life, practices, and the social representations.

Not least, there is the perception of *home* as mere housing unit, on one hand, and family home on the other. Apparently indissolubly linked, *home* and *family* seem to perfectly overlap in the representations of Romanians. A wide range of factors (economic, cultural, social etc.) influence people’s envisaging to buy a house when they wish to start a family, which, in turn, endorses a particular attitude towards “owning a house”. Against all economic forecasts, home ownership remains a fundamental element of Romanian social representations. This behavior is mainly explained by a persistence of Romanian traditional rural values on top of which various contemporary social processes were added. The financial capital that those who left the country in the first migration waves managed to gather was invested in the construction or purchase of a home. The economic crisis that touched all economic sectors brought along much more restrictive terms for loan granting, but Romanians continued to contract bank loans to purchase flats that they would later rent out at a price equivalent with the monthly mortgage. A section of the population living in rural areas or smaller urban communities – where the cost of living is not as high as in bigger cities – invested in buying flats in big cities as a provision for the future, anticipating the moment when their children would go to university. Instead of paying huge rents, which often exceeded the monthly mortgage for a similar housing unit, they preferred to take a mortgage loan and buy a flat.

According to the 2002 Census, despite a significant drop in the population, the number of housing units has increased by almost 6% (5.9% exactly) over the past decade, the increase concerning not only the sheer number of units but also their quality.⁵ INS⁶ statistics show however an upward trend for the year 2002, with a number of 353 homeowners out of 1 000 inhabitants (there were 282 homeowners out of 1 000 inhabitants in 1966, 296 – in 1977, 336 – in 1992). As for the average household size in 2002, it was 2.66 people.⁷ The data therefore shows that what Romanians value the most is being homeowners.

ROMANIAN MIGRANTS’ REPRESENTATIONS OF HOME

Post–1990 Romanian migration has been a topic of great interest for Romanian scholars. One of the studies issued from this interest identified three waves of migration from Romania to Western countries: 1990–1995 (a first “exploratory” wave, which did not exceed 5% of the population, mainly

⁵ *Recensământul populației* (Census) 2002, Raport Vol. III: <http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/RPL2002INS/index3.htm>.

⁶ *Institutul Național de Statistică* (Institute of National Statistics).

⁷ *Recensământul populației* (Census) 2002, Raport Vol. III: <http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/RPL2002INS/index3.htm>.

unskilled workers); 1996–2001 (the migration rate increases to 7%, unskilled workers); and 2002 – it starts with access to the Schengen area and it is characterized by an increase in temporary migration up to 28% (Sandu et al. 2006: 18) and the reliance on the network of relatives already living abroad. The third wave turns into a mass phenomenon, becoming a topic for public debate (Alexe et al. 2011: 86).

The fourth migration wave, the one dubbed by specialists as the “brain drain” (Alexe et al. 2011), starts in 2007. It involves a new and special category of migrants, with behaviors, attitudes, and values (Alexe et al. 2011: 87) different from those of the early-wave migrants, most of whom lacked high skills and performed mostly unskilled work (housekeeping, construction etc.). Moreover, while the first three migration waves were marked by a division, a rupture between life in the home country and life in the host country, this phenomenon is no longer observed for the latest migration wave. As Ruba Salih noted for Moroccan women who emigrated to Italy, and as noted by many other studies before hers, it is often the case that migrants belong to one social class in the sending country and a different one in the receiving country (Salih 2002: 61). For Romanian migrants in the latest wave of “high-skilled migration”, this type of division no longer applies as revealed also by the interviews in this study.

With regards to the first waves of migration, the phenomenon of house building looms large over the scholarly work. Romanian migration studies discuss the building of houses from the ground as they have become part of the Romanian landscape after the increase in the number of Romanians working abroad. The houses are ultimately the palpable proof of the remittances regularly sent by the early-wave migrants to the families they have left behind. Authors such as Anghel (2013) and Șerban and Grigoraș (2000) research this practice in their scholarly work. Anghel’s (2013: 163–169) account of the building of new houses by the inhabitants of the Borș region in northern Romania mentions a variety of reasons: practical (they want to live in the houses after their return), pride (a prominent value in rural Romania), financial investment, and, finally, obtaining symbolic capital that will allow the migrant to choose a suitable partner. Moreover, Anghel identifies homeownership as a prerequisite of marriage (2013: 164). There are villages made up almost entirely of houses newly built by people “from abroad”, houses that sit empty for years, waiting for their owners to return. The documentary photography project *Mândrie și beton* (Pride and Concrete)⁸, which began in 2010, illustrates vividly this phenomenon observed in one of the most widely broadcasted Romanian migrant communities (and one of the first). The project reflects the state of post-1989 Romanian migration up to that moment. The rationale behind the Romanian migrant’s decision to leave the country in search of work in the 1990s was: you leave, you do whatever work you can find (usually construction work because it was very well paid), you spend as little money as you can on living expenses there, so you can build your own *home* in a record time. As a general norm, the house was supposed to be “bigger than your neighbor’s”. Here is the narrative of one of the first migrants from Certeze (in northern Romania):

You can still see city dwellers “working the newspapers”, but most of them have legal papers, the men work in constructions, and the women are housekeepers. Old man Bumbușchi from Certeze, his eyes red with conjunctivitis, his body upright but still humble, stands by the entrance to the Monoprix supermarket on Av. Charles de Gaulle, overlooking the La Défense esplanade. He’s been there for such a long time that he has become a sort of landmark. Well liked and protected by the guards, Bumbușchi has been selling the ‘poor man’s newspaper’ every morning, for 17 years, in front of that same supermarket. He says proudly that with the money he made from newspapers he has built himself a **house** bigger than the village church and one for each of his children too.⁹

⁸ You can find more information and material from the project here: [<http://mandriesibeton.ro/>].

⁹ Ioana Călinescu, *Mândrie și beton. Povestea de succes a celor plecați la muncă în străinătate*: <http://mandriesibeton.ro/povestea.php>, retrieved on August 4, 2016.

I can safely say that his story is representative of Romanian migration, particularly rural migration, up to the third wave. Building/buying a *home*, regardless of the costs and sacrifices, was for a long time essential to what made a Romanian migrant. From my observations doing fieldwork among migrants, this is no longer the case as people’s attitudes towards building/buying a *home* in Romania are changing. This shift mirrors a slight change in people’s perceptions of where *home* is.

Next, I will show how perceptions of *home* have shifted as reflected in the answers given by Romanians living in Belgium to the question: *What is home for you?* With little variation, the answers illustrate how the representation of the notion of *home* has been reshaped, hybridized, and relativized. At the beginning of the meetings, the informants were asked to talk about where they felt *at home* and what *home* meant to them, but, after the first interviews, we narrowed down the questions. The narratives imposed this development as we noticed that relating to *home* was no longer about a particular land or construction as it was the case for the earlier waves of migrants. In her discussion of *home* in the imaginary of Gujarat Indian migrants in the UK, Lena Näre (2016: 50) notes that the notion of *home* changes, acquiring a relational and spatial dimension rooted in transnational spaces and practices. Further, for Romanian migrants, the meaning of the term *home* is to some extent split – when they mean *at home* (*acasă*), they no longer automatically refer to the *home* as in the physical space (*casă*).

Laura was born in a small Romanian village on the border with Hungary, and she currently lives with her family, her husband, and three children, in the center of Brussels. “Home to me is where I was born, in Nădlac (...) I feel at home where I was born.” [Laura¹⁰, 37, Belgium] Laura does not plan to return to Romania, and she does not think about buying a house there either, but nonetheless *home* is where she was born; the term does not translate in material terms for her, but in affective ones.

Cătălina followed her husband to Belgium after almost one year of him coming home to Romania every three weeks. This was in 2012. But even now, more than four years later, when she speaks of home, Cătălina says she feels at home in Braşov, in the flat she owns there and in her mother’s house, the one she grew up in.

I: And where is home (*acasă*) for you?

C: Errr... it’s complicated! Home would be in my home, but I rented out my flat.

I: So there’s someone else living in your home!

C: Yes! And home is at my mother’s. See, we tried a different thing the last time we were in Romania, in April, and we stayed with my parents-in-law; we went for the christening of my niece, so my brother, who lives in Bucharest, stayed at my mother’s, so we stayed at my in-laws’. Their home is very comfortable, my in-laws are very nice people and all, so nothing to complain, but I just didn’t feel at home. It was an unfamiliar place. I was a guest. The sense of home, I get it in my mother’s home. Still! And now I want to go to Romania in August and I’ll stay with my mother. My in-laws said: “You should stay with us again!” Mhm, if my mother is at home... I stay at my mom’s! (*she laughs*) (...) Now, I feel at home here too in the sense that I have everything I need, I don’t... there [in Romania], it takes so long to get everything... Here, you have everything [from the start], washing machine, you have your own stuff and you know where it is. The furniture is yours, the bed, I mean... but that deeper feeling of *home*, it’s in Braşov. [Cătălina, 38, Belgium]

Though apparently undecided about where *home* is, Cătălina associates the meaning of *home* with the place of her birth, the place where she continues to go back every year.

Just as illustrative of the shift in perspectives is the case of Raul. He moved to Belgium ten years ago. After a few years, his then girlfriend, currently his wife, followed him. They both work in the IT sector, which made it easier for them to find a job and adapt to the new country. In fact, they came to Belgium due to their outstanding skills as they both work for an international company. Although they

¹⁰ For confidentiality reasons, I changed the names of my informants.

see very clearly the pros and the cons of being a migrant, Raul and his wife plan to stay in Belgium. They make frequent trips to Romania – every two-three weeks –, and this year they bought a flat in Braşov, the city they left. Raul talks about Braşov as *the* landmark on his affective map, and he says that this city still means *home* for him.

I also think of Braşov as home. BUT there are small things that start to take root here as well. For example, our daughter who was born here ties us to this place. So we can say that part of *home* is Belgium. BUT, as far as I'm concerned, Braşov is still the main part. That's where I grew up, I went to school, I went to university... That makes it a place of reference for me. [Raul, 34, Belgium]

Another case that reflects this fluctuation between *here* and *there* in speaking of home is Tania's. She moved to Belgium 25 years ago, and she has had a Belgian partner for over 9 years. In the mean time, she helped many close relatives to come and settle in Belgium. Although she spent a large part of her life in Belgium, more than half actually, when she speaks of home, Tania feels tied to both spaces, Belgian and Romanian.

My home is here and there. My home... I must say that we moved here [into this house] eight years ago. Beforetime, I was renting a house or an apartment or something and it felt a little bit more at home here, maybe. But now we came here, we have two children with us, we made renovations, so I put my soul and my heart into the relationship with the house and that makes 'home' a little bit more here. It's also the time going... twenty five years! Ten years we know each other, so step by step, I would say less 'home' to my house in Romania, but my mother is there, my sister is there and the children of my sister, my brother. It's still home, you know? It's still home. (...)

[...] I try to go for ten days minimum. Otherwise, it breaks my heart when I leave my family. It's something ... what never ... went less ... the feeling of being part of my family there. There's my home and here's my home. My colleagues, for example, hear me sometimes: 'Oh, I want to go home!', but I mean I want to go home in Romania and they say: 'Go now, take the train earlier, so you are one hour earlier home.' I say: 'No, in fact I miss my mamma! I want to go home there!' (...) The roots are too deep!
[Tania, 43, Belgium]

Erika, who has been living in Belgium with her husband and two children for more than 10 years, has her own story of *home*. A few years ago, they started the "project home" in Romania, but they had to give up because of the bureaucracy and the difficult progress towards the realization of their project. They are now reaching the final stages of building a home in Belgium – despite their indecision about permanently settling in that country.

Hmmm... Can I cry? Tough question... Home is where my family is. I mean my small, small family, this one. But sometimes I wonder myself where home is? Because it's clear that it's where my family is. Now it's here. But I cannot say that home is in the rented flat from Braşov, unfortunately, I cannot say it is at my parents' place, because I left when I was 14... [She becomes lost in thought.] So this very morning we woke up and we said "it's so nice to be home" [She had recently come back from a visit to Romania.] ... It's the house we've been living in for 4 years ... Even if we're going to move out in less than a year and then we'll have a different home. But if you ask me, is Belgium your home? No! No way! ... If anything, I feel a bit uprooted, that's for sure. [Erika, 43, Belgium]

Each interviewee has his or her own view of *home*. There is, however, an idea that can be traced in all the conversations, namely the double belonging to the place of origin, to *home*, on the one hand, and to the place they currently live in, *the new home*, on the other. Eventually, the two become mixed, and the

new migrants, as opposed to the earlier ones (from the first migration waves), are no longer willing to put their lives on hold. Romanian migrants call home the place where they currently live, where part of their family is, without this meaning that they cannot feel at home in some other context, at some other point in time. This is certainly also the result of their “fourth-wave” migrant status (Alexe et al. 2011: 88), i.e. migrants who either migrated with their spouse/children or they benefitted from family reunification in the first 6 months of residence in the receiving country, which was the case for 90% of our interviewees.

Yes... I do feel sometimes that *home* is here, and some other times I feel it's in Braşov. Also, I read a quote, which I think it's true, and it said that *home* is where your heart is or something like that. And I think we can say it's here for the time being. But we also feel *at home* when we are in Braşov. It's so... mixed. [*She laughs.*] I think that if you personalize it a little and you feel good, home is here too. Sure, you're going to miss stuff from there and your friends there... [Maria, 40, Belgium]

For Maria *home* is the place she lives in, and she claims to be able to build this private space wherever she goes, as long as she has her loved ones close to her. During our meeting, she actually told us that migrating was to her a beautiful “adventure” on which she embarked together with her husband and her son. The house she lives in is filled with things brought over from Romania, which she perfectly adapted to the space of their rented home in Belgium.

Like Maria, Alis feels at home where she currently lives, in Belgium. But she also feels at home where she grew up, in Craiova, Romania. She says she has two homes. Both women experience a type of transnational life. Regardless of their location, they enjoy the same living standards, the same social status, they no longer feel tied to a construction that they would call *home*. This is reflected in their representations of this concept as they often distinguish between two *homes*.

In principle, this is our house, this is *home*. (...) This is where I feel at home; of course I feel at home in Craiova too. I have *two* homes. I can say I have two homes. (...) When I go *home* to Craiova, the first days, until I get accustomed, I feel a little awkward, but then, yes, it's home. But, yes, I can say I have two homes. And, indeed, after two weeks, I long to come back here. (...) It's where you're accustomed to be. [Alis, 35, Belgium]

Or, finally, in the concise words of one of our interviewees: “*Home* is where your heart is. If your heart is here... *home* is here... But it's also where my parents are.” [Tudor, 37, Belgium] By associating *home* with the heart and the family, Tudor no longer relates to a particular place, but only to his loved ones, his close family. For him, *home* is defined in rather immaterial, affective terms.

CONCLUSIONS

My aim in this article was to provide an overview of the evolution of the concept of *home*, which is essential to individual identity building in Romanian society. In tracing how the representation of *home* is deconstructed and reconstructed in the context of the migration process, the field material revealed that even for the latest-wave Romanian migrants, a tension between *home* (the building) and *home* (the symbolic space with its affective connotations) is felt.¹¹

Based on an analysis of the empirical material, our respondents were grouped into three categories reflecting both different personality types and complex experiential trajectories. As long as Romanian migration to other European countries was a practice limited to a particular social category (mostly

¹¹ About this tension, the building and rebuilding of the notion of *home* in different migration contexts, see Nadjé Al-Ali/Koser, Khalid (eds): *Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home*. Routledge: London, UK, 2002.

unskilled workers), who often occupied a marginal position in the receiving country, there was resistance to change and traditional attitudes were maintained within the Romanian migrant population. This was also reflected in the perceptions of *home*.

As the diversity of the migrant population increased (age, profession, capital etc.) however, both everyday practices and the social representations underwent reshaping. In light of the interviews conducted, of conversations and participant observation among Romanians living in Belgium, the representations of *home* can be inscribed in three main categories:

1. The *nostalgic* category, people who remember *home* as the place where they grew up, where their parents' home is; *home* overlaps with the sending country, Romania.

2. The *rational* category, people who believe that home is where they spend most of the time and who do not associate *home* with a particular geographic space.

3. The dominant category is however a *hybrid* one, with both nostalgic and rational respondents falling under it to some extent; for them, *home* means many places, experiences, people, and memories. They also define *home* as their loved ones – parents, children, spouses, or friends. They appear to be hybrid overlapping identities for whom *home* has to do more with emotions than with the physical space that dominates the collective Romanian representations of home.

It is safe to say that the migration process is extremely powerful in shaping and reshaping cultural patterns, the patterns of building, configuring, and reconfiguring identity. While most Romanians represent *home* as a static construction associated with a particular space, family or kin, and territory, namely as a physical entity (made of concrete, bricks etc.), for our respondents *home* is a much more fluid concept, which belongs to a rather immaterial, affective, and not so much physical sphere. For a long time and for specific categories of migrants (namely unskilled workers), *home* continued to mean their place of origin, their roots, but this is no longer the case. Today, Romanian migration reaches across social categories, leading to a change in patterns. Many Romanians working and living abroad, although they acknowledge a connection with their place of origin, their parental *home*, no longer purchase/build houses in which they are less and less likely to ever live.

Home thus becomes an affective symbolic space, which is by no means the representation the wider Romanian society has of *home*. *Home* becomes an immaterial space. Romanian migrants in Belgium no longer represent the home (the building) in traditional Romanian terms, but they perceive it as a fluid place, which they build and rebuild in their new environments, according to criteria other than material ones (i.e. cultural, affective etc.).

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