



FACES OF
MIGRATION

CASE STUDY

**Social remittances of migrants
from the Middle East living
in the Czech Republic**



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CASE STUDY: SOCIAL REMITTANCES OF MIGRANTS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

Introduction

Various forms of migration have always been associated with the mankind. Since time immemorial, people have migrated, seeking after better climatic conditions and richer sources of livelihood, which, besides classical archaeological finds, is best evidenced by the latest discoveries in the field of genetics. Ways of and reasons for migration have been transforming over the course of history, but their core remains the same. Migration significantly affects economic and social developments in both the countries of origin and of destination. This is why migration inevitably belongs into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and is to various extent reflected in practically all of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Unfortunately, in connection with the 2015 European refugee crisis, a strongly negative attitude among general public in the Czech Republic has developed towards migration, and especially towards the migration from the Middle East. This fact demonstrates the last year's survey of the Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM), which showed that 81 % of the Czech public is still against the reception of the Middle Eastern refugees [CVVM 2019]. This attitude of the Czech public influences the behaviour and rhetoric of politicians who seek voters. Its specific impact can be observed, for example, in the refusal to accept children and youth from refugee camps in Greece.

The presented paper is part of the "SDGs and Migration – Multipliers and Journalists Addressing Decision Makers and Citizens in the EU" project, which is running under the DEAR program of the European Commission. Its aim is to contribute to the discussion on SDGs in EU countries. We have been building on the well-known assumption that negative attitudes are often caused by ignorance and fear of the unknown, and that the issue of migration is frequently subject to deliberate misinterpretation of facts (**fake news**). The outcomes of this case study are intended to help politicians, journalists and institutions, both the state authorities and non-governmental organizations, as well as the general public, to get acquainted with the situation of migrants from the Greater Middle East territory living in the Czech Republic and to gain better insight into social remittances and other related issues.



Social remittances

Migration affects economic and social development on both sides – in the countries of origin as well as in the host countries. Migration contributes to the development of the economy in the destination countries, which is especially true in countries with aging population, where migration can, in the long term, support the growth GDP by complementing the shortages of workforce, through higher productivity and innovation. At a state level, migrants pay social contributions and taxes. Even people without initial knowledge of the host country language or environment and unable to participate in the labour market right after their arrival often benefit the economy of the host country in the long run [Quak 2019].

The lack of employment opportunities and investments in countries of origin are usually perceived as one of the reasons potentially encouraging migration. On the other hand, migration is capable of enhancing the economy and investments in countries where the population flees from, the most frequently thanks to the remittances. Financial remittances are, right after the direct foreign investments, the second most important financial resource of development and their volume exceeds the amount of development and humanitarian funding [Migration Data Portal 2019]. Remittances were initially referred to only as material means sent or brought back by migrants to their homeland. Only recently, about twenty years ago, experts began to use the term **social remittances**. In one of her first articles on this topic, sociologist Peggy Levitt described social remittances as “**ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving communities to the communities in countries of origin**” [Levitt 1998: 927].

With the increasing number of migrants, the increasing mobility of people and ideas, and the spread of modern communication and digital technologies, social remittances have been increasingly entering the area of the researchers’ interest since the late 1990s. Levitt [2001: 59-63] elaborated the issue of social remittances into more detail and classified them into three groups. She describes the first group as **normative structures**, comprising ideas, values and religious beliefs, including the recognized standards of behaviour or notions of how function family and society or of how an individual is involved in the community life. Furthermore, aspirations to social prestige belong into this group. The second group is referred to as the **systems of practice**, i.e. the real behaviour formed by normative structures. And the third group consists of the **social capital** – a network of contacts and collaboration based on mutual trust or friendship.

Major transfer of social remittances occurs in the case of the migrants’ permanent return to their country of origin or in the case of circular migration described as regular return to the home country for a longer period of time. To a lesser extent, social remittances are transmitted during short-term mutual visits. Transmission occurs even during phone and video calls or other contacts between migrants and their relatives and friends back at home. The interconnection between migration and social change is not yet fully explained, but there is no doubt that social remittances are among the elements that influence the thinking and decision-making of families, friends and whole communities in the countries of origin and can enhance social change. Social remittances expressing in transformation of the home country’s society include the influence of migrants on the promotion of reforms, women’s rights, protests or elections [Chauvet, Mercier 2014]. The effect of social remittances is directly or indirectly linked to the legal framework shaping the migrants’ opportunities for their social inclusion. The legal status of a migrant in the destination country plays an important role in here too, as it can make it impossible or difficult for a migrant to travel back to their country of origin for a short visit, thus negatively affecting people-to-people links and transfer of social remittances [Vickstrom, Beauchemin 2016].

Migration from the Middle East to the Czech Republic

As far as the Czech Republic is concerned, migration from the Middle East already occurred here in the era of socialism, in particular from the politically friendly countries, such as Syria or Egypt, whose young people came to the then Czechoslovakia to study, and some of them settled here after having graduated. In spite of that, the numbers of immigrants from the Middle Eastern countries are still relatively low compared to the immigrants from Ukraine, Russia, Vietnam or Mongolia [ČSÚ 2019]. Yet, the migration from this world region raises strong concerns among the Czech population, which the populists use to divide the Czech society and to wage cultural wars.

Methodology

The issue of social remittances of migrants from the Middle East is described in the form of a case study. It is based on a focus group with nine participants and subsequent in-depth interviews with two of the participants. The main research question of our study went **whether the Middle Eastern migrants living in the Czech Republic produced social remittances and what kind of remittances these were?** Some asked sub-questions concerned the respondents' relations to their country of origin and/or their experience with integration into the Czech society

Participants in the discussion

Considering the researched subject, the selection of respondents for the focus group was rather complicated. Nine participants from different Middle Eastern countries finally engaged with the moderated discussion. The original intention was for the group to be gender balanced 1:1. This objective nevertheless was not achieved; the final focus group (see Table 1) consisted of seven men and two women. To protect the privacy of participants we present fictitious names.

Table 1: Basic characteristics of the focus group participants.

Participant's name	Country	Gender	Matrimonial status	Education	Employment in the CR
Yusuf	Syria	M	unmarried	University graduate	Postgraduate PhD student
Zain	Syria	M	married	University graduate	Tourism industry
Hasan	Jordan	M	married	University graduate	Puppeteer
Ahmad	Egypt	M	unmarried	University graduate	Postgraduate PhD student
Mina	Egypt	F	married	University graduate	Intercultural professional
Hawa	Egypt	F	unmarried	University graduate	Multinational firm
Aziz	Lebanon	M	unmarried	University student	University student
Kasim	Egypt	M	unmarried	University graduate	IT professional
Naim	Syria	M	unmarried	University student	University student

Considering the scale and diversity of the Middle East, it is impossible to formulate broadly applicable conclusions based on this research sample. However, the relative homogeneity of the respondents in terms of their education and social status has made it possible to obtain information that pointed to interesting trends across this particular social group.

Key findings from the focus group

All participants were university graduates or undergraduates. It may be noted that all the participants lived in cosmopolitan environments, be it universities or international companies, and therefore most of them did not need to learn Czech with proficiency. However, each of the respondents knew at least a few common phrases and greetings. All the respondents without exception described Czech as a very difficult language, but their unfamiliarity therewith did not limit their lives in the capital; they were only facing certain communication problems outside Prague and large cities. However, all the respondents agreed that if they wanted to have Czech friends, the knowledge of Czech would be absolutely indispensable; they also considered it essential for integration into the society. They also agreed that for most Czechs living outside the capital, ignorance of English often is one of the main reasons for not willing to become friends with foreigners. According to the respondents, the main reason was not xenophobia, racial hatred or fear in the society, but a simple shame for not being capable of communicating. Only two respondents spoke Czech more fluently, namely a man who had lived in the Czech Republic for a long time, was married to a Czech woman and was bringing up a child in here, and a woman who was also raising children in marriage with a Czech man. The latter also used her excellent language skills on daily basis due to her job as an intercultural support worker for the Arab community.

The vast majority of the respondents had been living in other foreign countries besides the Czech Republic and therefore themselves as cosmopolitans. They did not like to define any country as their homeland, be it their country of origin or the Czech Republic. As one of the respondents described his feeling, **“I am still sort of a stranger here, but I am already a stranger in my home country too”**.

Another topic discussed was the establishment of the Middle Eastern immigrant communities in the countries of destination. The participants in the discussion agreed that they did not tend to socialize with other Middle Eastern immigrants. The reason for that was their sufficient social networks with foreigners from other countries (e.g. in the workplace), as well as with the Czechs (especially the participants with a Czech spouse). One respondent said he was not in extremely close contact with people in his country of origin because they did not have many common interests and habits. Another mentioned reason was the low number of immigrants from the Middle East present in the Czech Republic and the variety of the countries of origin. One of the participants mentioned large Middle Eastern communities in Germany, such as in Berlin, where immigrants were allegedly associating in the setting of **“falafel shops”**. In the Czech Republic there are only a few communities and associations (e.g. the Egyptian community or the Czech-Arab Society) and some embassies organize annual gatherings, nevertheless mostly of rather formal nature.

The respondents maintain contacts with families and friends in their countries of origin primarily through telephone, social networks, and video calls. The contacts are considerably problematic to maintain for Syrians whose relatives reside in Syria, since the telephone and internet connection is not working reliably there, is often completely unavailable or is subject to blackouts. For the respondents from Syria, the malfunctioning Internet connection is one of the reasons why they do not want to return to their home country or to spend a longer period of time in there, as their job is entirely dependent on Internet availability and communication. The economic sanctions imposed on Syria and its citizens also have a negative impact on the renewal of the country's telecommunications infrastructure. In addition to that, the sanctions prevent banking operations and non-bank money transfers between western countries and Syria, making it impossible for Syrian citizens to e.g. establish their own bank accounts in the Czech Republic.

Except for the Syrian participants in the discussion, who are naturally unable to go home to visit their families because of the ongoing fights, everyone else regularly visits their country of origin. At the same time, they maintain contacts with the locals and monitor developments in these countries. Only one participant in the discussion, the postgraduate student from Egypt, is currently considering returning to his country of origin. The others cannot imagine returning to their home country. One of the respondents said: **“When I am back home I am very happy, but at the same time I can see that there are the same problems as at times when I was leaving. I just perceive them more intensely and I am no longer able to adapt.”**

The participants thereafter discussed the specific reasons for not considering returning to their countries of origin. One of the main reasons was the fact that most of their family members had already moved abroad and therefore they had virtually no place to return. The same went for the majority of their close friends. As the respondents belong into the middle class and are university graduates or students, they lack relevant job opportunities or the opportunity to develop personally in their countries of origin. Also, the persistently unstable political situation (e.g. the Arab Spring, the war in Syria) was one of the serious reasons why they did not want to return. They consider life in the Czech Republic and other developed countries easier thanks to the functioning state structures, quality infrastructure, access to education and health care. Last but not least, as has already been mentioned, the participants feel more like foreigners in their respective countries of origin.

The main aforementioned reasons discouraging the participants from returning occurred across all the countries concerned. All the participants identically cited poor functioning of the state structures at political and administrative levels reflecting subsequently in the increased corruption and nepotism, poor infrastructure, poor quality of education, lack of employment opportunities, and non-respect for human rights and freedoms. As far as the Czech Republic is concerned, the respondents highlighted and would like to transfer to their countries of origin mainly the quality infrastructure, functioning public transport and services, low level of social inequalities, low level of corruption (in their opinion) in comparison to the Middle Eastern countries, freedom of expression, respect for people as individuals, quality public education and last but not least, plenty of greenery in cities.

In-depth interviews

Following the discussion with the focus group, two in-depth interviews were conducted to present more closely the life stories of two participants of the joint discussion, Hasan, originally from Jordan, and Mina from Egypt.

Hasan

Hasan comes from Jordan and has been living by turns in the Czech Republic since 2011. Hasan and his family have Jordanian citizenship. His six siblings, except for a brother who works in the US as a doctor, all live in Jordan. Hasan and his wife raise one child in the Czech Republic. He originally worked as a chemist in Jordan, where he had studied chemistry. He was born and raised in a Palestinian refugee camp, but his family later moved out of the camp. Hasan began to work as a community worker in the same camp, though his family considered a job in the field of chemistry more promising. Hasan became interested in puppetry and took a puppet production course in Beirut.

In another refugee camp, Hasan performed puppet performances portraying stories of child refugees and run a theatre project for women to help them cope with their negative experiences and feelings.

Hasan first came to the Czech Republic thanks to the Theatre Summer School in 2011, which he could attend mainly thanks to the financial support of his uncle. He wanted to devote himself to puppet theatre, but studying abroad was beyond his financial capacity. However, he managed to obtain a scholarship from one of Cathar foundations, thanks to which he was able to return to the Czech Republic and graduate from DAMU (Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts). Hasan participates in various theatre projects and performances, cooperates with a non-profit organization on various school programs and attempts to pursue a project in Norway, similar to the one he carried out with Syrian and Afghan refugees in the refugee camps in Jordan.

Mina

Mina comes from Egypt and has lived in the Czech Republic since 2010. She acquired the Czech citizenship after seven years. She is married and brings up two children here. Mina's husband is from the Czech Republic, but they met in Germany where they both studied and Mina originally planned to stay there because she already knew the language as she had graduated from a German grammar school in Egypt even before initiating her studies in pharmacy. She lives with her family outside Prague and commutes to the city for work. She no longer works in pharmacy, even though she had her university diploma recognized and validated in the Czech Republic. However, when initially choosing pharmacy in Egypt as her future profession, she gave priority to the future prospects of employment over her own private preferences. She does not send financial remittances to Egypt since she has no extra money. In the past it was even the other way around – her mother working in Egypt as an agronomist was helping Mina financially.

Mina works as a community interpreter, including for Syrian applicants for subsidiary protection. She considers the language fluency extremely important. Mina took Czech language courses herself, passed the language exam and completed a retraining course for her current job. From her own experience and from the experience of people she now works with, Mina considers the Czech language course, which is offered to foreigners for free, to be insufficient. The course consists of 400 lessons, but it is attended by speakers of Arabic as well as speakers of Czech-related Slavic languages, who, given the proximity of vocabulary and grammar, learn Czech much easier and faster. According to Mina, it would be appropriate if there was a course designed specifically for Arabic speakers, because even the script is a big obstacle for those who have never learned any European language.

According to Mina, the time allocation for language training is overall insufficient in the Czech Republic in comparison to for instance Germany, where foreigners learn the language up to 3-4 hours a day and are able to communicate and start working after 6 months already. Communication with the wider family of her husband was also very helpful for Mina. Her negative experience from the Czech Republic is associated with her temporary stay in a small town and with her former lack of fluency in Czech, making her incapable of communicating in common situations (e.g. with a shop assistant). In Přerov, where she originally lived, Mina felt lonely and isolated. In 2015, a bus passenger verbally attacked her, shouting, **"You Syrian, go away!"** None of the other passengers responded to the situation.

As to the connection with Egypt, Mina mainly communicates with her mother via phone, social networks or Skype. Her mother is interested in the situation in the Czech Republic, and together with the daughter they discuss the worsening situation in Egypt and the decreasing quality of public education. After Mina's father's death, she and her three sisters were raised by her mother alone. Both Mina and her mother attempt to visit each other,

but after obtaining the Czech citizenship it is harder for Mina to arrange a long-term residence for her mother as part of a family reunification, which is offered to family members of foreigners of over 60 years of age. Mina's sisters live outside of Egypt in Germany, France and the UAE.

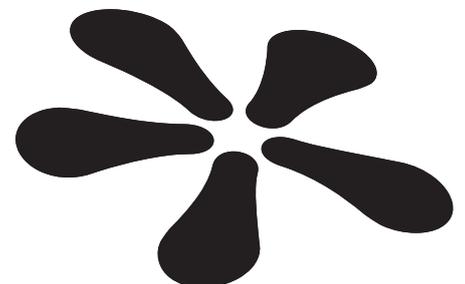
Conclusion

Migration affects economic and social development both in the countries of origin and in the countries of destination. One such way of affecting the development is through financial remittances that migrants send to relatives in their countries of origin, and which in total exceed the amount of development and humanitarian funding. Social remittances, such as ideas, ways of acting and information, are transmitted by migrants through visits and communication with people in the countries of origin, which is nowadays easier to maintain thanks to modern technology. However, the discussion with the focus group of Middle Eastern immigrants has shown that participants rather tend to bring their culture (especially food, home traditions, holiday celebrations) and information about their country to the Czech Republic (and other countries where they stayed) instead of transferring the newly acquired experience, information and attitudes from the Czech Republic to their home countries. One of the respondents for instance organizes cultural events intended to – besides other things – inform about his experience as a refugee in Jordan. The Czech society therefore seems to benefit more from the presence of foreigners than the respondents' home countries.

In general, the participants felt that changes in their countries of origin were extremely difficult and felt that they had little effect on them. One respondent commented that she “**sees more obstacles than openness**”. Overall, the participants were not too optimistic about the near future of their countries of origin.

Similar conclusions have been reached in another survey amongst qualified migrants living abroad, who felt like having little influence and limited capacity to exercise their own contribution when returning to their countries of origin. The transfer of experience and knowledge to their countries of origin was mainly prevented by mistrust in local governments and a sense of their disinterest in those who had gone abroad. The migrants recognized the governments' interest in achieving their own political goals rather than improving the situation in the country, faced the lack of openness to new approaches and experiences from abroad, numerous bureaucratic and institutional obstacles, slowness and lack of interest in cooperation [Nevinskaite 2016].

Another reason why the impact of social remittances of the discussion participants is rather minimal is that their families, especially siblings, are scattered around the world (e.g. in the US, Canada, the Arab Emirates, Germany). Many of their friends have moved abroad too. Last but not least, the impact of this group's social remittances is also limited due to the fact that their countries of origin are politically and economically unstable – (at present, perhaps with the exception of Egypt) there are either wars or turbulent political changes going on. That prevents the migrants from visiting their home countries frequently and from communicating with those who stayed in there.



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