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## Research Article

# Rethinking the Local Reality Transnationally: Local Networks and Transnational Reference Points of Elderly Migrants -

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## ABSTRACT

Switzerland, like other European countries that recruited labor migrants after World War II, faces an increasing number of elderly migrants. Most elderly individuals with a migration background wish to spend their life after retirement in their country of reception, while remaining transnationally mobile for as long as possible, thus commuting between the country of reception and the country of origin. The research and development project “Vicino – reaching elderly migrants where they live” has investigated the social networks of elderly migrants at their locality of residence in Switzerland as well as the significance of transnational reference points for them. In addition, the project explored the following questions: What impact do these reference points abroad have on their social networks within the locality of residence in Switzerland? How do these reference points affect the collaboration between existing local services (provided in the area of ageing, migration and community services) and elderly migrants? Findings show that elderly migrants’ transnational reference points influence their use of local services. For example in that they use local services offered by elderly and community services only at specified times; or in that their active involvement in associations is limited due to the “commute” back to their country of origin. For persons responsible in organizations offering services for elderly or for migrants, the findings suggest that a transnational perspective is useful and necessary when working together with elderly migrants in order to be able to plan and develop services suitable for those they address.

**Keywords:** Elderly migrants; Transnational; Switzerland; Community development; Social networks; Use of social services; Participation

## INTRODUCTION

European countries that recruited foreign labor after World War II, now notice an increase in the number of persons with a migration background who have reached retirement age [1-3].<sup>1</sup> This is also the case in Switzerland: A large proportion of elderly immigrants are former “guest workers” who migrated to Switzerland between 1950 and 1970 and reached older age there [1]. In the period between 1971 and 2016, the number of elderly migrants in Switzerland aged 65 and older rose from 35,410 persons to 165,741, an increase of 368%. In 2016, 34,633 individuals were in the so-called “fourth phase of life,” i.e. aged 80 and older. This constitutes an increase of 410% between 1971 and 2016 [5,6,our calculations]. If individuals who acquired Swiss citizenship are included, the absolute figures rise: In 2015, 307,000 persons aged 65 and older had a migration background of the first generation [7,our calculations]. In Switzerland, elderly persons with a foreign nationality are currently primarily from Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Austria, Serbia, Kosovo, Turkey, the United Kingdom and Portugal [8,our calculations for 2016]. In migration research, elderly migrants received but scant attention until the early 1990s [2,9]. The topic was long excluded in policy making and politics because the immigration of the “guest workers” was considered temporary and not permanent [10]. However, since the 1990s, a significant increase in research on the topic is noticeable. The “mobilities turn” reached the social sciences in the last decade and led to an increase of studies examining the phenomena from a transnational perspective [1]. However, the transnational reference points and transnational spaces of elderly migrants remained of peripheral interest [3,11] and have only become the central focus in more recent publications [for example, 1,3,11-13]. According to Glick-Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton, transnationalism is understood as “... the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of reception .... Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations - familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders” [14]. What is interesting from a transnational

perspective are the orientations toward return, the return behavior, the commuting activities of elderly migrants and the effects of these transnational aspects on elderly migrants themselves as well as on their social environment. In Switzerland, only a small proportion of elderly former labor migrants wish to return to their country of origin to stay. Among individuals in the age bracket 65 to 70, according to Bolzman et al. [3], these are as few as 1.8% of Italian, 4.8% of Spanish and 18.3% of Portuguese migrants.<sup>2</sup> Our own analysis of the figures of emigration shows that between 1991 and 2016, among elderly migrants with an Italian background (the largest group of elderly migrants in Switzerland) aged 65 and older, on average 890 individuals actually emigrated per year [15,our calculations]. However, a small number of migrants actually returning to the country of origin does not imply that there is no transnational mobility. Bolzman concluded that for elder migrants, transnational mobility was indeed a “way of life” [3]. 70% of those he surveyed spent short- and long-term periods of time back in their countries of origin [3], i.e. they “commuted” between their country of origin and their country of reception.<sup>3</sup> Transnational mobility often intensifies after retirement [11]. Factors promoting such “circular” migration are, for example, economic reasons (lower-cost living conditions in the country of origin, real estate in the country of origin, affordable travel costs) [3,11], family and social networks in the country of origin [3], good health [3,11] and various socio-cultural reasons (transnational identity) [3,11]. Factors preventing “circular” migration or a permanent return are, for example, poor health [3], good medical care as well as [3,10] family and social networks in the country of reception [3] and so-called “legal gates” [12], i.e. legal obstacles (such as social insurance agreements) that render mobility more difficult. Up to now, there is little scientific literature answering the question of what impact remaining in the country of reception combined with transnational mobility has on the “local situation” of elderly migrants in their country of reception, i.e. on social networks at the locality of residence and in the closer neighborhood. According to Zeman, remaining in the country of reception (“intentions to return not implemented”) leads to a strengthening of the migration networks in the country of reception [10]. “Circular” migration often

1 As Rallu [4] shows, a different numerical development can be expected depending on the migrant group and country of reception. In France, he expects a decline in the number of elderly people from Italy and Spain, and a substantial increase (more than double) in the number of individuals from Morocco and Turkey, along with a six-fold rise in persons from sub-Saharan Africa over the next 20 years.

2 Bolzman [3] attributes the higher percentage of Portuguese to the fact that they migrated later (not until the 1980s) and were on average younger.

3 “Commuting” in this sense refers to activities across borders between two or more countries. These activities can vary in frequency and duration [10].

occurs on a physical level (movement back and forth between two countries), but among the elderly increasingly also on an imaginary level. For that reason, Ciabanu and Hunter [1] stress that it is necessary to analyze not only the physical mobility among elderly migrants but also the “mobility of things and virtual and imaginary mobilities,” since these mobilities gain in importance, for example when physical mobility is no longer possible due to health reasons. The research and development project “Vicino – reaching elderly migrants where they live”, presented in this article, was launched to address the above-described research gap. It explored the following question: What role do transnational reference points play in the life of migrants who have reached old age in their country of reception? Initially, the research examined what effects these reference points have on social networks of elderly migrants at the Swiss locality of residence. Additionally, the project investigated how persons responsible of existing local services for elderly people, for migrants and for the community in general can integrate a transnational perspective when they develop, re-conceptualize or change existing services in participatory cooperation with elderly migrants and their organizations.

## METHODS

In the project Vicino, empirical surveys and evaluations (Section 1) were combined with exemplary interventions (Section 2) in order to develop a guideline for professionals working in the field of ageing and migration [16]. The publication is designed to guide them with regard to how elderly persons with a migration background can be reached in their neighborhoods and how existing or new services can be developed in participatory cooperation with elderly migrants and their organizations. The findings from both sections were presented in detail in a 2015 scientific report [17]. Selected as research sites were an urban, a rural and an urban agglomeration municipality.<sup>4</sup> The aim was to establish whether there are differences between the various types of municipalities with regard to the local social networks of elderly migrants.

### Section 1: Research

The number of elderly migrants and the distribution of the various nationalities in the three municipalities were analyzed using data from the Federal Office for Statistics and the Statistical Offices of the Cantons of Zurich and Aargau. However, on the community level, information on migrants can be analyzed based on their nationality only. Unfortunately, the currently available data do not indicate whether elderly migrants with Swiss nationality have a migration background and are thus patchy and insufficient. The study also includes 31 qualitative personal interviews with elderly migrants from the three municipalities. A total of 16 men and 11 women from the most frequent countries of origin of this age group were interviewed. 20 persons were between 65 and 74 years old, 7 persons between 55 and 64 and 4 persons between 75 and 91. 9 individuals were migrants from Italy, 6 from Spain, 4 from Germany, 4 from Turkey, 4 from Bosnia/Croatia/Serbia, 2 from Kosovo and 2 from Austria. At the time of interview, all persons were retired from work. 27 interviewees had come to Switzerland as labor migrants, most of them in the period between 1960 and 1979. 14 interviewees had a lower educational background (primary education), 13 had graduated from secondary school or had completed an apprenticeship (lower or higher secondary education), 4 interviewees from Germany, Croatia and Austria had a university degree (tertiary education).

<sup>4</sup> In each case, the municipalities with the most foreigners aged 65 and older were selected.

The sampling was conducted according to Strauss and Corbin's [18], “theoretical sampling” [19]. For that reason, the data collection took place in two phases: in the first half of 2014 and in January of 2015. In the second interview phase, important categories and topics, such as the connection between transnational and local activity, were deepened. Contact with elderly migrants was established mainly through trusted individuals from migrant organizations. The guided interviews used open questions and lasted one hour on average. Most of them were conducted in the interviewees' native language at a place of their choosing. With the agreement of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into German. The conversations were evaluated according to Mayring's [20] structuring and summarising qualitative content analysis. Moreover, in order to deepen the knowledge gained, in particular with regard to groups difficult to access, and to classify and order the findings, four expert interviews were conducted with two imams and two experts on ageing and migration. These interviews took place in January/February of 2015; they were also recorded transcribed and evaluated based on Mayring's [20] content analysis.

### Section 2: Intervention

Based on the knowledge gained from the interviews, which points up gaps in social networks of elderly migrants and in access to information and to ageing services, in this section of the project an event was organized together with the elderly migrant population in each of the three municipalities investigated. The aim of these events was to discover by exploratory means how elderly migrants and representatives of existing services for elderly and migrants as well as representatives of services in the field of community work come into contact and how they can conceive and further develop services in a participatory manner. In the urban municipality, this event was an activity based on the method of “future workshop” [21], in the agglomeration municipality an information fair on the topic of ageing, and in the rural municipality an informational event dealing with services available to assist the elderly. Due to the heterogeneity of the elderly migrants with regard to their concerns, their access to information as well as to services and the language of communication, the events in each instance targeted a specific group. In all interventions, the migrant population was participatory involved during all phases of planning. The activities were subsequently discussed in follow-up evaluation sessions with those involved. The findings from the two sections were discussed with an expert group and subsequently led to the guideline “Reaching elderly migrants where they live” (Ältere Migrantinnen und Migranten Wohnort erreichen) [16].

## RESULTS

Below selected findings are presented, which focus on the current state of transnational mobility of elderly migrants, transnational plans for the future and the influence of transnational mobilities on local social networks of elderly migrants and on their participation in organizations and services.

### Commuting activities of elderly migrants

The data show that there are differences in the frequency and length of visits and stays by elderly migrants back in their countries of origin. For some, this involves several months to half a year annually, while others make no or only very short-term and sporadic visits back to their countries of origin. In Vicino, it was shown that frequent contacts with the country of origin are promoted by several factors: via family relations in the country of origin (parents, siblings,

friends), property in the country of origin, socio-cultural reasons (identification with the country of origin, the feeling of being at home there), and diverse reasons of health (e.g. a mild climate in the country of origin). These findings are in keeping with results from previous studies [for example, 1-3]. There is little transnational mobility when migrants are taking care of their grandchildren in their country of reception or when they have a strong family tie to their children/grandchildren there. Women in particular could not imagine remaining in their country of origin for extended periods of time under these circumstances. One interviewee expressed this feeling as follows: If I do not see my children and grandchildren for a week, I feel as though I have lost something very big and important (urban municipality; place of origin: Bosnia; gender: female; age group: 70-74; year of migration: 1990-1999). Lack of social or family contacts in the country of origin also leads to a lower level of commuting activity. Tensions between various ethnic groups in the country of origin (such as in former Yugoslavia) and dependence on health care provided in the country of reception are reasons why some migrants commute less, as confirmed by other studies [for example, 1-3]. A dominant discourse that elderly migrants in Vicino repeatedly took up [cf. here also 22] is the notion of “being at home in two different worlds”. The following two quotes are exemplary of this frequently expressed sense of ambivalence: We come here [to Switzerland] and we’re Italians, we go back to Italy and we’re Swiss (urban municipality; place of origin: Italy; gender: female; age group: 55-59; year of migration: 1960-1969). I’m feeling a bit torn. If someone were to ask me where I belong now, well, I just don’t know. Somewhere, it’s different if I’m asked where I’d like to live. Then I could say: here in Switzerland (rural municipality; place of origin: Croatia; gender: female; age group: 75-79; year of migration: 1969-1969).

### Transnational future plans

At the time of interview, most interviewees stated that they would likely remain in Switzerland and not return to their country of origin. However, a definite decision was in most cases not made (concerning an orientation open to possible return, see for example Dietzel-Papakyriakou [9]). One interviewee expressed it this way: Sometimes I say, OK, I’m gonna leave, sometimes I say, I’m staying (rural municipality; place of origin: Kosovo; gender: male; age group: 55-59; year of migration: 1980-1989). These findings are also congruent with those in the study by Bolzman [3]. The reasons mentioned for deciding to stay in the country of reception are similar to those leading to a lower level of commuting activity (such as health care system in the country of reception, lack of family and social contacts in the country of origin, family and social integration in the country of reception). Along with these reasons, the technical aspects of social insurance, the so-called “legal gates” [12], are a reason why people do not return to their country of origin to stay. For example, since 2010, individuals from Kosovo can only receive the new old age and disability pensions on the condition that their official place of residence is in Switzerland [23]. The consequence is that they remain in Switzerland. As already described in other studies [for example, 10], the findings from Vicino also revealed gender-specific differences with regard to return plans: Women with children and grandchildren in Switzerland were less likely to consider returning to their country of origin than women without children and grandchildren, whereas there is no difference between men with and men without children and grandchildren.

### Influence of transnational mobilities on the local situation

The conversations with experts and the interviews with elderly migrants showed that commuting activities have an impact on how

elderly persons with a migration background make use of services offered by migration organizations (for example, nationality-specific and language-specific networks) as well as of general services for elderly people and the community. Language-specific and nationality-specific networks (e.g. religious networks, cultural networks, work-related social networks<sup>5</sup>, networks that during the war in former Yugoslavia assisted persons in the country of origin, etc.) are of great importance in the eyes of many elderly migrants. That is due to linguistic reasons<sup>6</sup>, factors of religion or identity (shared experiences of migration, a common frame of reference, collective experiences of discrimination), as documented in the following interview comments: It’s like a second home (...). My leisure activity is the “missione cattolica italiana” (urban municipality; place of origin: Italy; gender: female; age group: 55-59; year of migration: 1960-1969). We’re like one big family here. We get along very well with each other. If we didn’t have this center, we’d be spread out, a few here and there, like sheep all over the place. But here we’re united (rural municipality; place of origin: Italy; gender: female; age group: 70-74; year of migration: 1960-1969). For migrants from Germany or Austria, language-specific and nationality-specific networks are not as important as for non-German-speaking elderly, mainly because they speak German and do not need support with regard to language. For migrants who have difficulties in understanding German, the language-specific and nationality-specific networks frequently assume a kind of mediation role vis-à-vis the structures of the country of reception, i.e. their members receive information, for example, on services offered by general services as well as information pertaining to questions of social insurance. However, these networks are confronted with “transnational challenges”. Vicino demonstrated, first of all, that many of the language-specific and nationality-specific networks of elderly migrant’s depend on funds from their countries of origin. If such funding is terminated, it often threatens the continuation of the associations and makes their further existence dependent on the engaged commitment of the members. Second, many of these networks have a declining number of members, because younger people tend to be less engaged in language-specific and nationality-specific associations. Additional reasons are that some of the older members have returned to their country of origin, while others are no longer mobile enough to take advantage of the service on offer. Third, language-specific and nationality-specific networks are only used by members while they are in Switzerland, i.e. migrant organizations register low levels of participation, especially during the summer months. Fourth, those who commute take on fewer clearly defined responsibilities in the associations. This is especially evident in the following statement: I only do it when I’m here. And when I’m not here, well, they have to take care of it themselves (agglomeration municipality; place of origin: Spain; gender: male; age group: 65-69; year of migration: 1960-1969). Vicino discerned “transnational opportunities” of language-specific and nationality-specific networks alongside the “transnational challenges”. These networks constitute a kind of “space in-between” that links the country of origin and the

5 For example, the Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Internazionali ACLI.

6 Since many of the former labor migrants regarded their stay as temporary – a view shared by the Swiss migration and integration policy – the German language often tended to be poorly learned or not learned at all. Or as a Spanish female interviewee phrased it: My world has always been Spanish. It didn’t matter what language you spoke just as long as you had a job (urban municipality; place of origin: Spain; gender: female; age group: 60-64; year of migration: 1960-1969).

country of reception in an imaginary manner<sup>7</sup> while promoting the wellbeing of the members. That becomes clear, for example, in this interview statement: It's homeland, so then we feel no nostalgia (urban municipality; place of origin: Croatia; gender: female; age group: 60-64; year of migration: 1980-1989). Organizations and services for elderly or migrants, the health care system and the local community, which are directed to all individuals, regardless of whether they have a migration background or not, are little used by elderly migrants, as already shown in a number of studies [24-26]. This tendency became also evident in Vicino. In particular, persons with relatively poor knowledge of German made little use of the activities and services offered by these organizations. In contrast, migrants with a higher educational qualification and German-speaking migrants display a similar use pattern as Swiss natives. The lack or low level of use are primarily due to the absence of information about these services, but also due to language barriers and experiences of discrimination in Switzerland, which nurture a sense of skepticism toward the state institutions. Yet a factor that also plays a role is that Swiss institutions frequently orientate themselves towards an ideal image of active ageing, which to some extent is not congruent with the conceptions of ageing among the migrant population. Vicino shows how different forms of cooperation between general services and elderly migrants can be initiated and consolidated using a participatory approach. Manifested in this cooperation were two transnational challenges, which the language-specific and nationality-specific networks also must deal with:

- no continuous participation due to transnationality
- non-binding responsibility due to transnationality

For staff workers in elderly care, health services and community work, this means that when planning activities with and for the elderly migrants, they should take into account their habits of commuting. They must consider these when planning activities, or as an expert on migrants phrased it: There is a kind of summer recess here. They [practitioner] know this. It is common to stop the activities for about two or three months or longer (Rural municipality; expert interview; group: Italy). However, less commuting activity does not necessarily mean that integration into local networks and general services increases, for a decline in commuting activity is often due to health reasons, and health issues in turn can render the use of existing services more difficult. Between the three types of municipalities, there are hardly any differences with regard to the use of service, and correspondingly, the degree to which services are affected by the transnational activities of the elderly migrant population. It is assumed that it is not the type of municipality but rather the size of the group from a specific country of origin in a given locality that influences the establishment of origin-specific associations and organizations and thus the use of services provided by them. In order to gain a clear picture, it would be necessary to investigate not only municipalities with a high percentage of elderly migrants but also those with a small percentage.

## DISCUSSION

The findings presented from the project Vicino have shown that transnational mobilities of elderly migrants influence the use of locally offered services. Vicino pointed out possible effects of commuting (for example sporadic integration into associations). Yet

further studies are needed in order to elaborate on the complexity of local and transnational aspects and to demonstrate the implications –opportunities as well as challenges –of a transnational lifestyle for the individual concerned, the migrant organizations, and at the level of the community. It is imperative to deepen and refine knowledge on the following aspects: First, future studies have to be more oriented towards intersectionality than previously, i.e. they should take into account the interdependence of different factors such as gender, positioning in social space, and ethnicity [13]. Second, along with physical mobility, which was investigated in particular in Vicino, other aspects of mobility should also be explored, such as the “mobility of things and virtual and imaginary mobilities” mentioned by Ciobanu und Hunter [1]. For these aspects of mobility become more important as the migration population grows older in particular if physical mobility is no longer possible due to health reasons. Third, a transnational perspective should examine the effects of transnational mobilities, for example, on those who have remained in the country of reception without commuting. Fourth, it appears advisable not to regard transnationality as a separate isolated phenomenon at a specific stage of life, but rather to investigate it biographically over its longitudinal course. Zontini, for example, contains such an attempt to develop a biographical perspective [2]. In summary, future studies have to define the concept of what is local in a transnational perspective, and to analyze both aspects as well as their complex interdependence. Future studies also have to take into account the heterogeneity within the migrant population, for example differences in educational qualification, individual migration biographies, gender, and competences speaking the language(s) of the country of reception.

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