The Complexity of Return: Socio-Cultural Remittances of Highly Skilled Belarusians

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This article investigates the post-return experiences of highly skilled Belarusian professionals. I concentrate on the socio-cultural aspects of highly skilled migration and view returnees as carriers of new experiences, ideas, and practices by studying the ways in which they apply various socio-cultural remittances to the different spheres of their lives. In particular, I argue that the formation and transmission of socio-cultural remittances are strongly heterogeneous and selective processes, which manifest themselves to varying degrees not only in different people, but also in different aspects of people's lives. The analysis of several socio-cultural remittances in private and public spheres shows that in some cases the socio-cultural remittances display strong gender differences. Moreover, the highly skilled returnees appear to be proactive remitters: some of them re-interpret and transform the socio-cultural remittances before transmitting them. The research draws on the analysis of 43 in-depth interviews with highly skilled professionals who returned to Belarus after long periods of time spent abroad.

Keywords: highly skilled migration; return migration; social remittances; Belarus

Introduction

In this article, I analyse the socio-cultural remittances of highly skilled voluntary return migrants. I assume that abroad experiences increase the complexity of people's attitudes. Through emigration, a person learns new ways of thinking and behaving that enrich her social outlooks and allow a greater choice of alternatives. Having returned to their home society, returnees apply their new visions and attitudes to local contexts and by doing so transmit them to people surrounding them. Thus, 'socio-cultural remittances' occur. Nevertheless, the transfer of new attitudes is not homogeneous across the different spheres of people's life. While in some spheres people tend to apply values and ideas adopted abroad, they are reluctant to do the same in other spheres; they might even devalue the newly learnt norms.

This study focuses on some socio-cultural remittances related to (broadly defined) cosmopolitan attitudes. They are usually conceived of as a particular worldview characterised by a set of values and norms: prospects of global democratisation and justice, capacity to mediate between different cultures and affinity to dialogue, tolerance and respect, awareness of diversity and difference, and the decentring of values (Beck 2002;

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Roudometof 2005; Appiah 2006; Mau, Mewes and Zimmermann 2008). Cosmopolitanism is primarily a European phenomenon,[1] that is why I will refer to these values as Western values.

In this paper, I show that the transmission of cosmopolitan ideas and values is a highly selective process that manifests itself in different forms and with different intensity. I provide evidence for this selectivity in different contexts, such as the returnees' general attitude towards interpersonal relations, family and sentimental relations, views on education system, and opinions about politics.

Overall, I argue that socio-cultural remittances are heterogeneous in how they are manifested in the different spheres of private and public life. First, the socio-cultural remittances within the family and sentimental life display strong gender differences since men and women transmit almost opposite views on and behaviours related to marriage and parenting. Second, in some isolated cases, socio-cultural remittances concerning political views assume a 'reactive' form: after being initially highly valued, the norms and ideas learnt from Western societies are re-interpreted and transformed resulting in devaluation or even negation of their original meaning.

Theoretical framework

In the past, migration scholars focused almost exclusively on socio-economic changes occurring in both receiving and sending countries. Recently, however, they have paid much closer attention to socio-cultural concerns. It is commonly believed that returnees contribute to the development of their home countries[2] by transferring different types of capital, such as financial capital (monetary savings), human capital (e.g., training and work experience), and social capital (e.g., competences in building relations with people from different cultures, access to different sources of information thanks to their language skills) (see, for example, Taylor 1976; Thomas-Hope 1999; de Haas 2007; Ammassari 2009). Along with the assets of financial, human, and social capitals, it is also ideas, practices, and know-how that contribute to social change in home countries. The latter set of notions have been combined to form the concept of 'social remittances', broadly defined as 'ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital' moving across the borders (Levitt 1998: 926). The main idea behind this concept is that alongside money transfers, many migrants convey to their home societies the non-economic assets accumulated while living abroad. Moreover, the concept of socio-cultural remittances emphasises the proactive nature of returnees who not only carry, but also rework and re-interpret practices and ideas they have experienced abroad. Consistently with Boccagni and Decimo (2013), I consider economic remittances to be embedded in a broader socio-cultural context and will use the term 'socio-cultural remittances' to denote all non-material assets imported by migrants to their home societies. Often these new assets represent 'Western-style' values, ideas, and ways of life that are gradually spreading in less developed societies through migration and more general globalisation processes (Levitt 1998, 2001; Arowolo 2000; Baldassar 2001, 2007; Duval 2004; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011, 2013).

After almost 20 years of theoretical and empirical refinements, scholars generally agree on the typology of socio-cultural remittances including normative structures – ideas, beliefs, and values; systems of practice – actions and activities shaped by normative structures; and social capital (Levitt 1998). In this research, I focus primarily on the first two types of socio-cultural remittances. Socio-cultural remittances have several descriptive dimensions. Firstly, socio-cultural remittances may have both positive and negative consequences; secondly, many authors distinguish between individual and collective socio-cultural remittances; thirdly, socio-cultural remittances may scale up and scale out by moving through different levels and domains (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). Finally, socio-cultural remittances have a circular character: people's experiences before migrating strongly influence their lives in host countries, which then shape what they remit back to their home countries (Levitt 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011, 2013).

Considering the circularity of socio-cultural remittances, the pre- and post-migration intellectual, social, and cultural resources play a crucial role in the adoption and subsequent transmission of new ideas and behaviours. This means that highly skilled migrants represent a very important component in the mosaic of socio-cultural remitters. This study focuses specifically on highly skilled return migration, since 'home visits, and especially return on a more or less permanent basis, provide a privileged setting where the 'baggage' they [migrants] bring back can be appreciated' (Boccagni and Decimo 2013: 8). Returnees come back to their home societies and remit the adopted ideas and attitudes not only through verbal communication, but also by sharing their experience with, and setting an example for, people surrounding them. New ideas brought from abroad inform many aspects of returnees' lives. Thus, the study of post-return experiences combined with the focus on highly skilled migrants may provide useful insights into content and meaning, as well as processes of formation and transmission of socio-cultural remittances. In her seminal article on social remittances, Levitt (1998: 944) makes an appeal for further research on social remittances 'in cases involving urban-to-urban migration, lower levels of economic dependence, or countries that are geographically and culturally farther apart', which have been largely ignored by social researchers. Studies to date have focused mainly on low-skilled remitters acting between the wealthy Western host countries and the less developed home countries.[3] Under such circumstances, the transmission of socio-cultural remittances seems to occur mostly in the form of mirroring the Western values, ideas and behaviours, which results in (to some extent) homogeneous distribution of newly adopted views across the various life spheres. In case of highly skilled people from socio-culturally developed contexts, the process of formation and transmission of socio-cultural remittances is neither obvious nor straightforward. In order to explore the complexities of highly skilled people's lifestyles and to study the ways in which they apply socio-cultural remittances to the different spheres of their lives, I focus on post-return experiences of highly skilled professionals in the Belarusian context.

Research context

Belarus regained independence in 1991, after the collapse of the USSR. Unlike other former Soviet countries, Belarus has passed the transition period in a relatively smooth way enjoying a relatively stable economic situation. That is why the country has never experienced mass emigration processes of the kind that happened in Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet countries. This is not to say that Belarusian people are immobile. According to the Migration Policy Centre (2013), around the year 2012 almost 500 000 Belarusian-born people resided abroad. However, if only Belarusian citizens are taken into account, the numbers are much smaller: Eurostat data show that by 2014 about 70 000 Belarusian citizens had taken up legal residence in the European Union. From 1990 to 2009, the main receiving countries were Russia and Ukraine. Traditionally, the most popular destination countries beyond CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) were Israel, the USA, Canada, and Germany. Cases of emigration to these countries formed 60 per cent of all emigration cases to non-CIS countries in 2009 (Bobrova, Shakhotska and Shymanovich 2012). According to official statistics, people with tertiary education migrate more actively compared to others. The proportion of people with tertiary education among emigrants is about 30 per cent; almost half of them choose Western destinations (Danzer and Dietz 2013). The migration patterns in Belarus are sensitive to both gender and education levels. Men with secondary education (builders, specialised workers, etc.) prefer Eastern destinations (Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan) while the majority of migrants moving towards the European Union and Northern America are females with a tertiary education degree. To some extent, Belarus faces the challenge of the 'highly educated brides' drain (Shakhotska 2009).

The official statistics show a high intensity of emigration to non-CIS countries in the end of the 1990s and its stabilisation towards the end of the 2000s. In contrast, the Eurostat data indicate that the number of Belarusians living in the EU increased considerably within this period, particularly in Germany, Italy, and the Czech Republic (Bobrova *et al.* 2012). These differences might be explained by the Belarusian accounting system, which allows a person to contemporaneously maintain her permanent residence in Belarus and obtain a residence permit elsewhere. In this way Belarus has no records about people permanently residing abroad and, consequently, has no reliable statistics on return migration. The latter, however, is growing mostly because of return of international students upon completion of their degrees in universities abroad. Currently, Belarus has a limited number of legislative tools dealing with the issues of diaspora and return migration. These include the *Programme for Development of Confessional Sphere, National Relations and Cooperation with Compatriots Living Abroad for 2011–2015*, the *National Programme of Demographic Security 2011–2015,* and Law No. 162–3 'On Belarusians living abroad' adopted in 2014. The latter contains a set of provisions aimed at supporting the integration of people having Belarusian roots but it does not contain any specific measure regarding return migration. In fact, the law has received multiple criticisms because of its excessive generality and the absence of concrete policies on collaboration with Belarusian diasporas abroad.

Methodology

This article is based on the analysis of 43 in-depth semi-structured interviews with highly skilled Belarusian returnees, collected in 2014 in Belarus.[4] The informants have been reached by means of mass media as well as personal and online social networks. All of them have completed at least one level of tertiary education and/or work as professionals and all of them have spent at least five years abroad.[5] The interviews were conducted at informants' homes as well as in public places. The average length of interviews was about two hours; both Russian and Belarusian languages were used. The interviews focused on two main topics: a retrospective look on the informants' life abroad and an exploration of their return experiences (from the decision-making process to their impressions, feelings and today's lifestyle). The major interest was in how these people think they have changed after living abroad and in which way they transmit their new knowledge and experience to other people in Belarus after their return. Among the informants there were 12 women and 31 men aged from 25 to 57 years (34 years is the median age). Ten informants were engaged in a sentimental relationship, 21 were married, and 12 were single. The distribution by qualification field is as follows: 6 informants graduated in natural sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics), 4 informants graduated in arts and philosophy, 13 specialise in computer sciences and information technologies, 19 graduate in social sciences (economics, psychology, business, marketing, political sciences). All the data was analysed by the qualitative research software ATLAS.ti 7. The participants' names have been changed.

Post-return self-perceptions

International migration and various cross-border activities are some of the most obvious expressions of globalisation. Migrants' exposure to different cultural sources gives rise to the emergence of intermediate 'hybridised' cultures (Baumann 1996; Hannerz 1996; Pieterse 1996) and adoption of Western values and norms under a common label of cosmopolitanism (Roudometof 2005; Appiah 2006; Norris and Inglehart 2009). The adoption of cosmopolitan values requires a profound transformation of self-understanding and self-positioning in relation to other people and the world.

Throughout the interviews I often encountered evidence of self-perceived internal change that has taken place in the highly skilled returnees during their experience abroad. Naturally, all of them noted that the possibility to live abroad was a very good and valuable experience in terms of personal and professional growth. However, while for some living abroad became just a worthwhile adventure, for others the contact with foreign cultures meant deep changes in their attitudes towards life and people in general. Many informants repeatedly acknowledged that while abroad they became both more self-confident and more tolerant. Indeed, tolerance appeared to be the main component of cosmopolitan views remitted by the highly skilled Belarusian returnees. Many of them claimed to have become more tolerant to diversity, less prone to stereotypes, more balanced in their judgements and flexible in relations with others. As Varvara puts it:

I would not say that I've changed a lot – I like the same things I liked before. Nevertheless, I saw many people from other cultures, with other orientations. I've become more open-minded in terms of the different human behaviours. I think I used to be more ignorant; I believed in some stereotypes. (...) I've learnt to have a calm attitude towards the differences between people and to appreciate them (Varvara, 31: 46).[6]

Many other informants have expressed similar ideas about their tolerance and appreciation of different kinds of diversity, from sexual orientation and physical disability to race, religion, and cultural particularity. Another respondent, Artem, also thinks that the international experience has allowed him to develop cosmopolitan values and attitudes. He has conveyed this idea in a very clear way:

I am not changed. What I had before has developed. I have not changed my opinions, but they have become wider and more global. I am not sure if I would have developed differently, if I had never moved away from here. However, abroad I developed an understanding of different countries. People from all over the world live there. Different countries, different cultures, but we are the children of one planet. This idea has not changed; it has just become closer to me. I understood there is a kind of chauvinism inside us. No, we are all children of one planet. (...) You see, I said this thing about the children of the planet, but it is just another label. I think that such labels do not exist. We are those who put them on ourselves. It is just a limitation. Yes, other people may have another accent or may have seen other cartoons when they were children. People can be girls and boys, and from being one or another, they do not become less people. It is the same (Artem, 37: 55).

It is hard to say exactly what mechanism underlies the interior evolution perceived by the returnees. These people have spent many years abroad – they have become older and wiser (or at least more experienced), and of course the more discreet attitude to people may be the result of growing up. Nevertheless, as they themselves claimed, the international experience and contacts with other cultures and traditions have played a huge role in the formation of their attitude towards other countries and peoples. The respect (as well as disdain) towards other cultures cannot appear in a closed environment: the more people communicate with 'others', the more informed an opinion about them they are able to form. Not surprisingly, the most active remitters of cosmopolitan values are those who have multiple cross-border relationships with people from other countries. The majority of returnees have maintained relations with their foreign friends after coming back to Belarus: they visit each other and constantly stay in touch using modern communication technologies. As Liudmila (8: 36) noted, 'all the people I like to spend time with live abroad. Even my best friend is a foreigner'. Hers is not an isolated case and many people have very broad geographical circles of friends.

Through multiple contacts between people from different cultures, cosmopolitan values have penetrated into a part of returnees' private lives, that is, their attitudes to, and relations with, other people. They have

become more open-minded and tolerant towards diversity in both appearance and thinking. Nevertheless, in other spheres of private life, e.g., sentimental life and family projects, the influence of Western values on individual mental outlooks is not so straightforward.

A vision of the family among the returnees

While the adoption of cosmopolitan attitudes in general interpersonal contexts is quite common for both men and women, the socio-cultural remittances in the areas of sentimental and family relationships are sharply gendered. The female returnees actively demonstrate Western attitudes and promote them among their relatives and friends; the men, conversely, appear to devalue gender roles and sentimental relationships promoted by Western culture. This result is particularly interesting in the Belarusian context, where spousal relations are those of partnership, with both husbands and wives having equal rights and obligations.[7] Historically, women and men in Belarus enjoyed equality in both public and private issues; one of the returnees is very confident about the matter:

> *The behaviour model is somehow patriarchal but it is not so wildly patriarchal as in some other countries. In Belarus, there is an androgenic understanding of family, as is also the case in Russia. In Ukraine it is different. In other countries, they struggled actively for women's rights. In Belarus, woman's position in the family management has never been undermined. That is why feminism has never had any backing here and made no sense. Women have worked here since 1917. They would have preferred not to work! All these things [feminism, emancipation] are imposed and do not fit our contexts. So I like Belarusian women because they are both feminine and on an equal footing with you. They do not have these stupid liberal-feminist ideas. Mostly they are not even consumerist. There are many consumerists but not among the people I know* (Valeriy, 19: 47).

Notwithstanding the general gender equality in Belarusian families and the absence of dramatic changes in family roles described in literature (e.g., Levitt 1998; Vianello 2013; Nowicka 2015), the Western values concerning relationships with the opposite sex have entered the agenda of highly skilled female returnees. Some women told me that after their return to Belarus they feel freer from society obligations and expectations about sentimental relationships. Moreover, in some cases, the attitude towards marriage has been reappraised.

> *I've changed my attitude towards relationships. In Poland, a man and a woman may be just friends. A man can treat you to a drink without any consequences. In Belarus, there is a feeling of duty towards the other, a fear about what he said. For example, I heard this from many people. 'You've been together for a year and he does not marry you? Leave him and find yourself another one!' It is very strange for me* (Polina, 20: 63).

The marriage has a great social value in the Belarusian society.[8] A girl is supposed to be married in her early twenties just after completing her degree (which is yet another social expectation). Getting married in a woman's thirties or later is socially discouraged: the woman is stigmatised as a bluestocking and all she does may be interpreted as the 'hunt for a husband'. Experts note that in recent years the population of Belarus has acquired features of the so-called 'European' reproductive behaviour. The average age when people first marry has increased considerably – from 22.8 years for women and 25 years for men in 2000 to 25 years for women and 27.1 years for men in 2013. Although the mean age of women at first birth is increasing too (from 24.9 years in 2010 to 25.7 years in 2014), these indicators are still much lower than in other European countries.[9]

According to demographers of the Resource Centre of the United Nations Population Fund (2015), Belarusians are becoming more inclined to value self-realisation and career development. Moreover, Belarusian women actively participate in both economic and political life of the country. For instance, as Belstat data show, in 2014 women accounted for almost 50 per cent of the economically active national labour force. The proportion of women among the heads of organisations was about 47 per cent while the proportion of women in the national government was about 29 per cent (Save the Children 2015). In that sense, the attitudes of the female returnees towards having children perfectly fit the actual Belarusian context. This is how Liudmila, who has spent many years abroad, has presented her formula in this regard:

> *By today's standards, 28 years it is too early to have children. I think that you have to have children after 30 and before 40. Because the life with children is completely different, you cannot return your time, and you cannot leave your children anywhere* (Liudmila, 8: 40).

Similarly, the experience abroad has affected the reasoning about motherhood and parents' roles in children's upbringing. Albeit the equality of spouses within marriage in Belarus is protected by both the Constitution and the Code on Marriage and Family, the popular understanding is that the mother is the primary person in raising children and mothers more frequently get the custody of children. In contrast to these established ideas, Polina told me how her perception of family roles has changed; she began to question the existing status quo in discussions with her friends:

> *In Poland, fathers have a different attitude to their children. And for me it's become a norm. In Belarus, my friends sometimes tell me 'My husband is so wonderful! This evening he's gone out with the baby!' It is shocking for me! It is his child! Why is he wonderful? It is a normal thing!* (Polina, 20: 64).

What is more, some female returnees expressed their disapproval towards Belarusian men and their attitude towards women. During our conversations, Belarusian men were depicted as lacking in initiative and sluggish. Ksenia, married to a foreigner, said: 'After returning, I can see it better. The men in Belarus are passive. I would like to see masculinity in men, they do not have it' (26: 58). In fact, the women's attitudes towards choosing a partner have been modified: an ideal spouse is not a Belarusian man, but an active and resolute foreigner.

> *After returning I felt as if I was flawed. I mean, I am not flawed, I live in harmony with myself. But abroad men always said compliments to me. Here they do not. (...) I think that to marry a worthy person I have to go abroad. I do not see anybody here* (Valeria, 1: 92, 1: 98).

As I have mentioned above, socio-cultural remittances in terms of the vision of sentimental relationships are strongly gendered. In fact, male marital intentions differ a lot from the female ones. For instance, many male returnees returned to Belarus because of and considering their sentimental relationships: some had great difficulties setting up their private life abroad, others were pulled by sentimental relationships beginning to develop at home. It was very common to hear men complain about foreign women's emancipation and masculinity. In fact, many acknowledged that their return had been a largely rational decision to find a partner with mentality similar to their own in Belarus. As Nikita puts it: 'I was more inclined towards a Slavic soul' (10: 23). Mikhail has similar thoughts: 'I am 75 per cent sure that I will build my next relationship with a Belarusian or a Russian girl' (22: 55). As some explained, communication with the opposite sex in Belarus is smoother and to some extent easier because of many places where people can meet each other.

It is easier to start a conversation, to make contact. It does not matter whether it would be something serious. They see you as a man first. And there is the eye contact. In Canada, everybody stays online. Here it is still possible to meet a girl in a bar. I think it is a good thing. Cause why do we need bars and restaurants if we cannot get to know anybody there? (Arseniy, 41: 38).

In fact, the majority of male returnees seemed to be enchanted by local women and spoke about them in superlative terms. More often, they paid more attention to such external features as beauty and personal grooming, but also tenderness and femininity were highlighted. Roman is very happy about his private life: 'The private life is going very well here. There are many beautiful and clever girls for every taste. (...) I have not chosen yet. I am not in a hurry. Why should I? Here there are many beautiful girls and few normal men; there it is the opposite' (14: 46). Another informant describes his impressions in terms of a big choice too: 'In Minsk the number of beautiful girls and their style is five times greater than there. You can enter any bar and you will be impressed. (…) It is much easier to fall in love in Minsk because the choice is much bigger here' (Artem, 37: 26, 37: 31).

Although the euphoria over Belarusian women is prevalent, it is not uniform. Some male returnees have noted that many Belarusian girls have a consumerist vision of life: they would like to 'sell' themselves at a high price and desperately rush men in the pursuit of marriage. Many of them associate these new female attitudes with the influence of the West and strongly disapprove of them.

The private life is going bad. My old age is coming. I would like to start a family. But there is nobody to do this with. I do not see any serious women. By serious I mean those who are disposed to accept definite roles in a family. I see many families where the attention is replaced by money. I think this is not right. (...) I would like a woman to live for family, for children, for home. (...) My friend invites me to meet some girls but they have other interests. They want to meet rich men. Lights of a big city beckon (Vladislav, 33: 53, 33: 54).

You can see how Vladislav stresses the importance of traditional family roles, in which a woman is 'a keeper of the hearth'. This shows there is a kind of clash of female and male values about sentimental and family relationships. Whereas the women remit the newly adopted Western values and attitudes towards family-making and female roles based on independence and equality, the men transmit reactive socio-cultural remittances that valorise traditional views on gender roles, and strongly disapprove of and devalue the Western ideas of feminism and emancipation.

Socio-cultural remittances in the area of public life

Socio-cultural remittances transmitted by the highly skilled returnees do not refer solely to the private sphere. While living abroad, the informants have learnt about new ideas concerning public institutions and adopted new behaviours with regard to them. In what follows, I discuss the transmission of Western values into two sectors of public sphere, that is, education and politics, and show how these socio-cultural remittances are heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory.

Education

The Belarusian system of education includes primary, basic, and secondary schools, professional technical education, and tertiary education. Within the Belarusian education system there are two official languages used

within the system – Belarusian and Russian. Secondary schooling (primary and basic levels included) lasts for 11 years, while most university courses run for four to five years. Thus, a person with tertiary degree is ready to enter the labour market at the age of 22 to 23 years (many students start working in the third year of their studies).

Although no studies are available evaluating the overall quality of education in Belarus, it is possible to rely on several unsystematic indicators. One of these is the standard of literacy, which amounts to 99.8 per cent among adult population. About 98 per cent of population have at least basic education, while almost 25 per cent of people aged 25–64 years have at least one tertiary degree. Every year, more than 80 per cent of secondary schools' graduates enter university. In 2009 the Belarusian Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) began to create and implement the Systems of Quality Assurance Management (SQAM). Belarusian HEI participate in the EU cooperation programmes such as Tempus and Erasmus Mundus. In 2015, Belarus entered the European Higher Education Area and became part of the Bologna Process. Moreover, in 2015 two Belarusian universities entered the QS University Rankings: EECA 2015, a dedicated ranking of the top universities in Emerging Europe and Central Asia.[10] Although many positive changes have occurred in the Belarusian education system in recent years, it still suffers from multiple drawbacks. For instance, some media[11] have reported that the quality of secondary and tertiary education is constantly decreasing. Belarus is one of the few European countries that do not use international assessment systems, such as TIMSS and PISA, to assess students' progress. Moreover, vocational and tertiary education sometimes struggle to meet the needs of the labour market.

That is, the public opinion about education in Belarus is twofold. Whereas some people think that the Belarusian system of education has inherited the best features of the Soviet system and is of very high quality, others criticise its inconsistencies and conservativeness. The majority of the highly skilled returnees are closer to the second viewpoint and some of them have very clear ideas about how the Belarusian education system has to be changed. Constantin, for instance, is convinced that the old system will soon die as it is only centred on rational thinking and does not take into consideration the emotional sphere. For this reason, home schooling is gaining popularity in his family and among his friends, since it takes into account the emotional side of children's development. On the contrary, Matvey thinks that the Belarusian education system does not place enough emphasis on entrepreneurship and business thinking.

After having studied in Poland, they have the European standards and all that stuff, I understood that we need to change the system of education in Belarus. I think that it has to be changed even in the primary school. Recently I was walking with my friend and I said to him 'You know, we have studied abroad, I have two degrees. We were good students. Why do we have so little money? If we were taught the basics of business, the basics of accounting in primary school, we should be rich already!' And he replied 'Well, but you know a lot of rhymes!' You see, there is an emphasis on humanities and culture, which is not so useful in the real life. It is just a bonus, which does not help in real life, where you have to earn money. In Europe, in my opinion, they understand it (Matvey, 4: 9).

In many aspects, the Belarusian system of education is quite cumbersome and clumsy. Although many macro changes have recently been introduced, educational programmes and courses are obsolete and sometimes to not correspond to modern requirements. The system is very rigid, bureaucratic and has hardly been reformed to date. In fact, the main claim among the highly skilled returnees was that the education system has to become more flexible in order to be capable to respond to the market demands.

Abroad there are many different scholarships. People study something for a few years, then leave it and start to study something new. In the end, you have only one degree but a bulk of knowledge in many fields of study. People become multi-skilled. It makes workforce more flexible. Sooner or later we will have to do it (Nickolay, 12: 51).

The most highly skilled returnees have had the experience of studying abroad, which allowed them to learn more efficient modern education technologies and adopt new approaches to education in general. What is more, the educational socio-cultural remittances are not reduced to just communicating the new attitudes to the people around. Rather, many returnees actively transmit the new values through concrete actions aimed at their children, with foreign language education being the most prominent form of such remittances. For instance, Liudmila sent her older son to an English-speaking kindergarten, because 'in this way, he will get used to the foreign language and it will not be a problem for him when he grows up' (8: 6). All Miroslava's children go to an English-speaking school, too. Another informant speaking six foreign languages prefers to teach his daughter himself and considers the knowledge of foreign languages as one of the most important skills:

I teach English to my daughter. Because the teaching standards at school are poor. It's the same with Chinese. We chose that school because they teach Chinese. I went to Chinese classes together with my daughter to be able to help her (Yury, 9: 33).

However, foreign languages are not the end of the story. Many returnees obtained their degrees in foreign universities; they consider this experience to be very valuable and useful. Consequently, a large part of them does not question the necessity to provide their children with a foreign tertiary degree. Even more, they consider it to be their parental duty and in most cases they have already taken this decision for their children (a choice that cannot be challenged). Grigoriy, for example, '[does] not see any point in studying here if it is possible to study abroad' (42: 44). Similarly, Liudmila 'would like [her] children to have a very good international education. Then they will choose for themselves where to live' (8: 44). Hence, there is a strong tendency to internationalise education among the highly skilled returnees. Along with generic attitudes, they remit and implement specific strategies based on the Western values and norms they have adopted in host countries. The situation is completely different in the case of political views.

Politics

According to its Constitution, Belarus is a presidential republic with a bicameral parliament. Nevertheless, according to various political scientists, the country is ruled by the increasingly authoritarian leadership of its president, Alexander Lukashenko (e.g., Eke and Kuzio 2000; Korosteleva, Lawson and Marsh 2003; Silitski 2005; Marples 2005, 2009). Lukashenko assumed the post on 20 July 1994 and was re-elected four times in 2001, 2006, 2010, and 2015. In 2005, Belarus was labelled as 'Europe's last dictatorship' by the former USA Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice; since then it has become a *cliché* perpetuated by international media and politicians.

The Belarusian political opposition is represented by a small number of political parties, civic movements, and initiatives, which have no representation in the National Assembly and appear to be week, fragmented, and scarcely involved in the political process (Charnysh 2015; Freedom House 2015). As Ash (2015) argues, 'rather than contesting elections out of office-seeking incentives, opposition parties stage campaigns because foreign funding is directed to successful groups within the opposition'. Also according to various media, many opposition organisations get funding and other types of support (e.g., cultural events, headquarters of media

organisations) from foreign countries, mainly Lithuania and Poland.[12] For many years, Belarus has depended on Russia in both political and economic terms (and was consequently unwelcomed by Europe). Nevertheless, Lukashenko's criticism of Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014, the hosting of diplomatic negotiations during the conflict in Ukraine, as well as the release of political prisoners (opposition leaders) in August 2015 taken together appear to be an attempt to stabilise Belarus' relations with the European Union. Indeed, the EU foreign ministers agreed to suspend targeted sanctions on Belarus (171 people and 10 entities) for 4 months from 31 October 2015. However, various international organisations promoting democratisation and freedoms criticise Belarus for the absence of democracy, lack of political and individual freedoms and disregard for human rights. For instance, according to the report of OSCE/ODIHR (2015) on the Presidential elections in 2015, 'Belarus still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections'. Moreover, Belarus' scores in a number of rankings of political rights and freedoms is far from optimistic: it ranked 157 out of 180 countries in the 2015 World Press Freedom Index; 119 out of 175 countries in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2014; while Freedom House has evaluated political rights and civil liberties in Belarus at 6.5 (1 being the most free and 7 the least free).

Politics is arguably a sensitive topic: while some informants referred to it as to an undesirable topic, the majority of my informants did not touch the subject at all. For this reason, I am aware that the results discussed below are biased to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the opinions of four returnees about politics provided me with interesting insights on socio-cultural remittances in this public sphere (further, by referring to 'the returnees' I mean the four people who expressed their opinion about politics in an explicit way). In fact, their central point concerned the concept of democracy – one of the central values of Western culture. For instance, the returnees changed their opinions about the meaning of democracy and its applicability to the Belarusian context. One of the returnees, for instance, realised that the Belarusian political oppositionists do not have a clear idea about what democracy actually is. She stressed that the idea of democracy, on which the opposition relies, is distorted and needs to be improved and implemented through real and practical steps.

I think that my civil position has become more active. Before I went to Poland, I participated in demonstrations in squares and shouted something about democracy but I did not know what it is. I think that a big part of our oppositionists do not know what it is, either. (...) They do not understand what they are saying, they are just dreaming. On the contrary, I know how it works. (...) They have opened town hall meetings; all the documents are online. These are small but very important things (Anastasia, 29: 41).

In a similar vein, others spoke about their disappointment with the Western democracy, which did not appear to be what they had expected. They referred to the fact that in Belarus Western countries are depicted as the countries of freedom, but in practice the personal freedoms there are as limited as in Belarus.

I was disappointed with the Western [political] models and all that democracy stuff. Especially in the USA I consider it zilch. It lets me take our situation easy, because the difference is not so big. Moreover, when I saw young people in Belarus or in Ukraine shout about democracy... It is not so simple and straightforward (Fedor, 13: 64).

What is more, as is the case with sentimental and family relationships, the socio-cultural remittances are not always transmitted in a linear way following the scheme 'learn new values – adopt new values – transmit new values'. Rather, the returnees learnt Western ideas while living among the people who generally shared these viewpoints, but the next steps were somehow reversed: they not only did not blindly internalise the new ideas,

but also did a great analytical and interpretative work resulting in the devaluation of perceived ideas and practices, and in transmission of reactive socio-cultural remittances.

> *I cannot tolerate all these people [oppositionists]. I think that the formed system is what we need. It was a long journey to this understanding, 10 years, but it is impossible otherwise. I do not want to say that this is the best solution; I do not want to say that I do not sympathise with the wives of political prisoners; and I do not want to say that I do not worry about the wasted potential of a huge number of young people. Nevertheless, I understand that it is much the lesser evil for a Slavic country. Again, there are some rules of the game here. Do not go into politics, pay taxes, you will be young and rich. (...) Now if we go to the polls, and there will be Alexander Grigoryevich [Lukashenko] and a Democratic candidate, I would vote for Alexander Grigoryevich. I used to spit on people like me. Now I can afford to speak in this way myself; I've come to this by myself. I did not read it in the newspapers or in books. It is my own experience* (Pavel, 3: 34).

Clearly, the returnees question the value of democracy promoted by Western cultures and in some cases even negate it. It is not the value of democracy *per se* that they question – the returnees did not doubt the importance of democracy. Rather, these people are aware of, and feel disappointed with, the inconsistency between the expected and the perceived democratic status quo in Western societies. In response to this cognitive dissonance, they began to transmit reactive socio-cultural remittances that devalue the originally learnt ideas and behaviours. This is not the issue of positivity or negativity of social remittances discussed in sociological migration literature (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). In the latter case, the process of remittances is still linear, but it is awarded a moral judgement by individuals (either positive or negative). In the case of reactive socio-cultural remittances, the new value (or idea, or practice, or whatever) is not transmitted at all; what is transmitted is its devaluation or even the opposite value.

As I have mentioned before, the phenomenon of transformation of returnees' political views into reactive socio-cultural remittances is not widespread: four returnees provided me with accounts showing these attitudes. The majority of participants in this research did not share their political views and attitudes, thus the prevailing opinion is not clear. This may be a sign of the lack of civic freedoms, which induces people to keep silent on their political preferences. Hence, further research on the topic is required to both explore socio-cultural remittances in the political sphere and to test the incidence of their reactiveness.

Conclusions

In this article, I focused on some normative structures and systems of practice transmitted by the highly skilled Belarusian returnees in both private and public life. I showed that although the adoption of Western socio-cultural norms and ideas sometimes leads to their transmission, e.g., in several interpersonal relationships and in the sphere of education, in other contexts it appears to be a highly heterogeneous process. The socio-cultural remittances in the area of family and sentimental relationships appear to be strongly gendered and represent two opposite currents: women adopt the Western point of view, while men reinforce their traditionalist attitudes and values. In the political realm, few returnees criticised or questioned the Western understanding of democracy – their opinions and attitudes had undergone a reactive transformation. Certainly, the formation and transmission of reactive socio-cultural remittances is neither a common nor a uniform process; its mechanisms and circumstances of occurrence are far from being clear and require further exploration.

Notes

[1] According to the *European Values Study*, solidarity, tolerance, and appreciation of democracy are typical European values, which are appreciated to a much lesser extent in the former Soviet countries.

[2] However, according to Cassarino (2004) the propensity of migrants to become actors of change and development at home depends on their preparation for return, which requires time, mobilisation of tangible and intangible resources, and willingness on the part of the migrant.

[3] For example, previously studied social remittances include those between the United States and the Dominican Republic (Levitt 1998, 2001; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011); Europe and North America and West African countries (Tiemoko 2003, 2004); Thailand and the Netherlands (Suksomboon 2008); Israel and Sub-Saharan African countries (Sabar 2008, 2013); the USA and Spain and Ecuador (Mata-Codesal 2013); Ukraine and European countries (Vianello 2013; Kubal 2014).

[4] This article draws on the author's PhD research.

[5] The host countries include Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Spain, Tajikistan, Ukraine, the USA.

[6] Each quotation is attributed to in informant in a following way – (Pseudonym, interview number: quotation number in the interview).

[7] OECD Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) is reported as 'very low'. The SIGI quantifies discriminatory social institutions, spanning major socio-economic areas that affect women's lives: discriminatory family code, restricted physical integrity, son bias, restricted resources and assets, and restricted civil liberties.

[8] The public opinion on marriage as a socially desirable value is very strong in Belarus (similarly to Russia and Ukraine). One of the most popular Russian TV-shows is called *Let's Marry*. It promotes marriage as the most important goal in a woman's life. In the popular culture, the wedding is considered the most important day for any girl, so it happens that people take loans to organise a lavish wedding party. Also, a recent addition to the wide range of *how to do* seminars has been a *How To Be a Happy Woman* seminar. Some of the participants said that, during the seminar, marriage was claimed to be the main requisite for happiness.

[9] According to the United Nations Economic Commission, the mean age at first marriage in 2012 was much higher in many European countries. For instance, Germany (30.7 years for women, 33.5 years for men), Italy (30.8 and 33.8), Denmark (32.2 and 34.8). The mean age at first birth in Europe in 2013 was higher too: e.g. EU28 – 28.7 years, United Kingdom – 28.3, Germany – 29.3, and Italy – 30.6.

[10] Belarusian State University is on the 36th place in the ranking, while Belarusian National Technical University is on the 72nd place.

[11] E.g., *The Quality of Belarusian Schooling is Falling* (http://afn.by/news/i/140343); *Centralised Testing Is Improved Every Year, but the Level of Education Falls* (http://news.tut.by/society/233096.html); *Overloaded Children, Teachers' Salaries, the Lack of Hours: What is the Weak Point of the Modern School?* (http://news.tut.by/society/349837.html).

[12] *Vilnius: The New Mecca for Belarusian Shoppers and Activists* (http://belarusdigest.com/story/vilnius-new-mecca-belarusian-shoppers-and-activists-13258); *Poland Sponsored Belarusian Opposition – Report* (https://www.rt.com/politics/poland-belarus-opposition-sponsorship-310); *Poland Supports Belarus Opposition* (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/06/world/europe/06iht-poland06.html?_r=0); *'Here We Breathe Freedom': Basowiszcza Festival Amplifies Belarus Opposition* (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/20/belarus-opposition-music-festival-poland-basowiszcza).

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