

## Transnational activities and aspirations of irregular migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands

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**Abstract** Both the literature on immigrant transnationalism and on irregular immigration suggest that irregular migrants engage relatively little in transnational activities because of the obstacles connected to their legal and economic status. Drawing on participant observation and in-depth interviews with a diverse population of irregular migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands, this article, however, demonstrates that irregular migrants undertake various transnational activities. Moreover, it is argued that a focus on aspirations helps to understand why irregular migrants do or do not engage in specific transnational activities. Distinguishing between investment, settlement and legalization aspirations, I analyze whether and for what reasons irregular migrants undertake economic, social and political transnational activities. It is concluded that future research on transnationalism and incorporation of irregular and regular migrants alike could benefit from contextualizing on the side of agency of the migrants by taking their aspirations into account.

**Keywords** TRANSNATIONALISM, TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVITIES, IRREGULAR  
MIGRANTS, ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION, UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS,  
ASPIRATIONS, BELGIUM & THE NETHERLANDS

## **Introduction**

Transnationalism is an important perspective because immigrants' cross-border activities are intertwined with the way they live in receiving societies (Portes et al. 1999: 228). Although it has become widely recognized that a transnational perspective is significant for studies of immigration, such a perspective has not yet gained a strong foothold in the field of *irregular* immigration.<sup>1</sup> Studies on irregular migrants not only devote little attention to the transnational activities their research subjects engage in, but, when they do, the main focus is mostly on remittances instead of other cross-border activities. Moreover, scholars who have studied this economic transnational activity have commonly focused on irregular migrants' transnational economic *obligations* and how these pose limitations for their incorporation in the receiving society and their chances of achieving upward social mobility there (see e.g. Burgers and Engbersen 1999; Mahler 1995; Morawska 2003; Roer-Strier and Olshtain-Mann 1999).

While these research efforts have provided a preliminary understanding of the economic transnational activities of irregular migrants, most scholars in the field of irregular migration have not yet widened their view to include social and political transnational activities as well, whereas this is a common practice in the broader field of transnational studies (e.g. Bloch 2008; Levitt 2001; Østergaard-Nielsen 2001; Portes et al. 1999; Snel et al. 2006; Vertovec 2003). This article attempts to contribute to the literature on irregular immigration by studying the economic, social and political transnational activities of irregular migrants. More specifically, by focusing on the relation between irregular migrants' aspirations and their transnational practices, it seeks to understand why certain irregular migrants do or do not engage in specific transnational activities. My research findings thereby provide insights from which the scholarly debate on immigrant incorporation and transnationalism in general could gain as well. In the next section, I discuss how a focus on aspirations might add to the current literature.

## **Transnationalism and irregular migrants**

What exactly is meant by transnationalism is not always clear (Levitt et al. 2003), yet there is plenty of empirical research that calls itself transnational (Smith 2006).

Transnationalism has originally been defined by Basch et al. (1994: 6) as ‘the process by which transmigrants, through their daily activities, forge and sustain multi-stranded social, economic, and political relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create transnational social fields that cross national borders.’ At first, studies on transnationalism tended to include all kinds of cross-border activities, thereby exaggerating its scope. Researchers also purposefully looked for transnational phenomena by selecting case studies in which transnational activities were abundant. In other words, many studies sampled on the dependent variable, for example by conducting qualitative studies of organizations active in the transnational field (Portes 2001).

In order to avoid sampling on the dependent variable, researchers have started to focus on the individual level instead of the level of the community (Portes et al. 1999). In addition, the exaggeration of the significance of transnationalism has made some scholars attempt to delimit its scope (see Portes et al. 1999). These attempts have resulted in conceptualizations in terms of ‘regular and sustained cross-border activities of individuals’, making ‘freedom of movement the point of departure’, thereby implicitly excluding irregular migrants (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004: 1178). Furthermore, in the literature on transnational social fields (see e.g. Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Smith 2006), irregular migrants are recognized as participants, but their experiences are not systematically compared to those of regular migrants because the emphasis in such studies is on the level of the community as a whole. Consequently, the question if and how irregular migrants specifically experience and engage in transnationalism is usually not asked.

In spite of the lack of specific attention for irregular migrants in the literature on immigrant transnationalism, a specific view on irregular migrants’ transnational activities can be discerned in the limited number of empirical studies that deal with the effect of legal status on transnational activities. The common view is that irregular migrants are transnationally inactive because of the obstacles they face. Waldinger (2008: 18), for example, found that irregular migrants visit their home country less frequently than regular migrants do and emphasizes that this is because of the barriers to cross-border mobility that irregular migrants experience. Furthermore, Mazzucato (2008: 213) claims

that the difficulties faced by irregular migrants in the receiving society ‘hamper migrants’ possibilities to invest in their home country.’ Hence, because irregular migrants are less able to create a stable position for themselves in the receiving society, they are considered less equipped to engage in transnational activities. In addition, Bloch (2008: 298) found that migrants who had legal access to the labour market were ‘more than six times’ as likely to send economic remittances as other migrants. According to the author, this means that ‘structural exclusions based on immigration status’ adversely affect transnational capabilities (Bloch 2008: 302). Likewise, Portes (2001: 189) found that ‘immigrants’ transnationalism is associated with a more secure economic and legal status in the host country.’ According to this set of authors, transnational activities are consistently associated with legal status, apart from other higher human capital resources, such as education, immigration experience, occupational status (Bloch 2008; Mazzucato 2008; Portes 2003: 886; Waldinger 2008). Following this line of reasoning, it is likely that irregular migrants’ engagement in transnational activities is negligible.

A similar expectation can be derived from the literature on irregular immigration. Researchers implicitly assume that irregular migrants do not have the possibility to engage in transnational activities because they have to struggle to survive. Scholars have extensively shown how irregular migrants’ pre-migratory expectations are often unrealistically high (Adam et al. 2002; Mahler 1995; Staring 1999). Stories of migrants who thought that the streets in the destination country are paved with gold are quoted frequently (see, for example, Staring 1999: 64). Consequently, when migrants find out that the society they encounter does not offer the unlimited opportunities they envisioned, their adaptation processes are automatically oriented *downwardly*. Many studies describe how dreams are broken and how irregular migrants have to deal with the difficult conditions they face (Adam et al. 2002; Burgers and Engbersen 1999; Mahler 1995; Staring 1999; Van Nieuwenhuyze 2009). In doing so, scholars equate the adaptation process that irregular migrants go through with a process of learning ‘how to survive’ in these societies.

Many scholars therefore explicitly use the term ‘survival’ to denote the lives irregular migrants lead (see e.g. Adam et al. 2002; Chavez [1992]1998; Datta et al. 2007; Düvell 2004; Düvell and Jordan 2006; Engbersen 1996; Jordan 2006; King and Mai

2004; Kosic and Triandafyllidou 2004; Psimmenos and Kassimati 2006; Triandafyllidou and Kosic 2006; Van Nieuwenhuyze 2009). As researchers focus on studying how irregular migrants manage to survive in receiving countries, the emphasis is on migrants' lives there while their transnational activities often remain out of focus as a result. Researchers implicitly assume that while irregular migrants are busy surviving, there is no room to engage in transnational activity and therefore devote little attention to it.

All in all, both the literature on immigrant transnationalism in general and the literature on irregular migrants have demonstrated that irregular migrants face important structural barriers. However, this does not imply that scholars should not pay attention to the transnational activities of irregular migrants. Instead, the question can be raised what type of activities irregular migrants do and do not engage in given these barriers, and how we can understand the variety in the activities they do or do not undertake.

In order to answer this question we need to pay more attention to the agency of irregular migrants. In this respect it is important to note that a few scholars of immigrant transnationalism in general have recently argued that migration motives help to understand why migrants engage in specific transnational activities (Al-Ali 2002; Mascini et al. 2009). In this article, I aim to take this attention for migrant agency a step further by focusing on what irregular migrants currently strive for. For analytical purposes, it seems better to take irregular migrants' current goals and intentions as a starting point of analysis as their initial migration motives may have changed. Such goals and intentions are usually referred to as *aspirations* (MacLeod 2009).

Aspirations form a conceptual bridge between structure and agency as they are rooted in both: they are constructed in the habitus of the individual where they are informed through socialization into larger cultural contexts and by the opportunity structure (MacLeod 2009: 15). Distinguishing between different types of aspirations has proved to be helpful in studying other aspects of the lives of irregular migrants as well (Van Meeteren 2010; Van Meeteren et al. 2009). The analysis presented below demonstrates that distinguishing between different types of aspirations helps to understand the divergent transnational activities irregular migrants do and do not engage in: specific aspirations entail specific transnational orientations, and these prove to go

hand in hand with specific transnational activities – even among a structurally curtailed category as irregular migrants.

Before turning to the empirical analysis, the data and methods used in this study are discussed, followed by a concise overview of immigration policies in the Belgium and the Netherlands that provides background information.

### **Data and methods**

Although no international comparison is intended, this research has been carried out in Belgium and the Netherlands for practical reasons.<sup>2</sup> Three different sources of data have been used in this research: participant observation of irregular migrants as well as 45 open-ended interviews and 120 semi-structured interviews with irregular migrants. The 120 semi-structured interviews with irregular migrants were carried out by research assistants in Belgium in 2004 and 2005. These interviewers contacted respondents in bars, teahouses, organizations, churches or mosques. Furthermore, respondents were asked if they could refer the research team to other irregular migrants. This so-called ‘snowball method’ has been successfully applied in other studies involving irregular migrants (e.g. Burgers and Engbersen 1999; Chavez [1992]1998; Kosic and Triandafyllidou 2004; Paspalanova 2006; Van Nieuwenhuyze 2009), and is now widely recognized as a virtual prerequisite for meaningful surveys in the field of irregular migration (Black 2003).

In addition to the interviews gathered by research assistants, I lived in the cities of Antwerp and The Hague for various months each to observe and interview irregular migrants in 2006 and 2007. I encountered respondents in the streets, in churches, through organizations, and through snowball sampling of my own personal network as well as those of irregular migrants. Over the course of my fieldwork, I associated with irregular migrants on a daily basis. I was invited to dine with informants and I attended parties and birthday parties, and I invited some of them for dinner or drinks in my fieldwork apartments. In addition, I undertook dozens of strolls with respondents. In all these different ways I gathered a lot of field notes (for a detailed discussion of my fieldwork, see Van Meeteren 2010).

I selected only a few of the irregular migrants I observed for an in-depth interview. I usually only invited a person after I had gathered enough information through participant observation to determine if the respondent's story would yield new insights. In other words, participant observation allowed me to sample theoretically. I conducted 45 open-ended interviews with irregular migrants. The shortest interview took about an hour whereas the longest interview lasted over nine hours (in three sessions). Most interviews took between two and three hours, and were held in Dutch, English, French or Spanish. I have translated quotations into English.

In addition, participant observation allowed me to see how the migrants I interviewed 'lived' what they reported to me in the interviews. In this way, I was able to validate the answers they gave to me during the interviews, and I was able to reflect – sometimes together with the respondents themselves – on their actions in relation to what they told me in the interviews. Thus I was able to ensure that the combination of participant observation with interviewing yielded a more accurate portrayal of the lives of irregular migrants than I would have gathered if I had used methods of self-report alone (see also Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

The research assistants interviewed four migrant groups: Bulgarians, Congolese Moroccans and Turks. Because the migrants that were interviewed by the research assistants belonged to large ethnic communities, I have made sure to interview members of smaller communities as well. The migrants I interviewed myself were from 26 different countries. I have tried to capture as much variety as I could both in terms of country of origin and through theoretical sampling (cf. Charmaz [2006] 2009).

The analysis is grounded in both types of interviews with irregular migrants as well as in participant observation. The analysis mostly relies on the open-ended interviews with irregular migrants and the participant observations. The semi-structured interviews with irregular migrants mainly served as a means of comparison in the first stages and later on they served as checks for the conjectures I developed during the research process.

## **Irregular immigration in Belgium and the Netherlands**



Immigration policies play a decisive role in the allocation of life chances to irregular migrants (Burgers 1998; Engbersen et al. 2007; Menjivar 2006b). As governments create opportunities and impose barriers to irregular migrants, state policies shape their window of opportunity and their room for maneuver. In addition, policies may also affect the choices that irregular migrants make within this window of opportunity (Cyrus and Vogel 2006; Holifield 2004). Furthermore, the room for maneuver that policies create is not limited to the boundaries of the receiving nation-state: policies are considered to affect even irregular migrants' transnational interactions (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004).

Being neighbouring countries with similar immigration histories, policies aimed at irregular migration do not show major differences in the Belgium and the Netherlands (Van Meeteren 2010: 51-69). Whereas policies to combat irregular migration in Belgium and the Netherlands were traditionally focused on guarding the external boundaries of the nation-state, they have increasingly turned inwards over the last decades (Brochmann 1999; Broeders 2009). Both in Belgium and the Netherlands, irregular migrants have a right to urgent medical care and all children have a right to education (Van der Leun 2003; Van Meeteren et al. 2008). Furthermore, over the years both states have provided several ways for irregular migrants to legalize their status and continue to do so today (Benseddik and Bijl 2004; Van Meeteren 2010). The two main legalization strategies are getting married to a national or someone holding permanent residence status, and applying for regularization.

Both in the Netherlands and in Belgium, criteria for regularization are not specified. In Belgium, around 15 000 irregular migrants apply for regularization each year, in part because the police tend to tolerate the presence of irregular migrants with pending regularization applications. In the Netherlands, the same practice has been common, but the number of applications has recently decreased because the immigration services have built in a deterrent by immediately detaining migrants who make unqualified applications (Van Meeteren 2010).

This structural context created by the Dutch and Belgian policies does not mechanically constrain the actions of irregular migrants. Instead, they react to this exclusionary context in different ways (Triandafyllidou and Kosic 2006). I therefore focus on irregular migrants' aspirations and transnational activities *given* this regulatory

context. After all, their aspirations have been shaped within and in reaction to this context.

### **Three types of aspirations**

Three types of aspirations of irregular migrants have arisen from my analysis. Irregular migrants with *investment aspirations* aim to work and make money in the country of destination, and to return to their country of origin once they have acquired enough savings. These respondents strive for future upward mobility in their country of origin. They are usually ‘target earners’ (Massey et al. 1987): they save for very specific projects. Musa (Turkey), for example, says: ‘I am here with only one goal and that is to save money and return to get married and start my own business.’ And Mohammed (Morocco) (country?) says: ‘When I have earned enough money, I will go back to Morocco to start a business there.’ These migrants mean to stay in the receiving society only on a temporary basis, until their project has succeeded.

Migrants with investment aspirations usually come from countries where there is some potential for investments. Tümer (Turkey), for example, says that it makes sense to invest in Turkey: ‘Turkey’s economy is doing well now so I go back and start my own shop there.’ Migrants with investment aspirations usually migrate without their partner and children to keep the costs down. Furthermore, they often originate from countries nearby, so that the costs of transport are relatively low in order to make their migration worthwhile.

Contrary to the temporary ambitions of migrants with investment aspirations, a second category of respondents is oriented towards residing in Belgium and the Netherlands on a long-term basis. These migrants with *settlement aspirations* aim to start a new life in the receiving society and do not have the intention to return:

The employment situation is bad in Morocco (...) Belgium and the rest of Western Europe to the contrary has much more employment possibilities and more industry to offer people jobs. (...) That is why I,

like many other illegals by the way, have come to Belgium to build a new life here. (Badr, Morocco)

Unlike migrants with investment aspirations, whose stay in Belgium and the Netherlands is a means to an end, the objective of migrants with settlement aspirations is the stay itself. They aim to build a life in the receiving society and try to make it as comfortable as possible. For this category of migrants, legalization of their stay can be pleasant but they do not regard it as a necessity. Jean, for example, in response to the question if he wants to legalize his stay, says that he ‘does not feel like getting into that whole affair.’ He indicates that he would be happy if he were legalized, but that he is not taking any action in that direction himself. He says: ‘In my own way, I have arranged for a pleasant stay in Belgium.’ Jean believes that the life he is living in Belgium is much better than the life he would lead in Congo. Like Jean, other migrants with settlement aspirations are content with the idea of living without papers because in their opinion they lead a better life now than they would in their home country.

Migrants with settlement aspirations usually come from countries where high levels of unemployment, corruption and economic problems are common, as in South America or in North Africa. Many migrate in order to improve their economic position, but others, for example, want to stay because through their right to urgent medical care, they receive medical assistance they would not be able to afford in their home country (cf. Rosenthal 2007). Similarly, the educational possibilities of respondents’ children can fuel settlement aspirations (cf. Fozdar and Torezani 2008). Even though irregular migrants only have limited rights in Belgium and the Netherlands, the few rights they can claim are often reason enough for them to aspire to stay there, as they often do not have similar rights in their countries of origin.

Contrastingly, the third category of respondents has *legalization aspirations*. These aim to acquire a legal residence status. For them, leading a better life is inextricably intertwined with obtaining a legal status. They feel that they can only live a comfortable life having a legal status:

You simply don't have any rights if you don't have your papers. (...) So my only hope is to get a legal status (...) only then can I start to feel good and try to actively participate in this society. (Kamel, Morocco)

Likewise, Mehdi (Morocco) says: 'I plan to build a future here (...) I will do anything to get a residence permit. I know that it is going to take much effort; nevertheless, I will do anything to become a full citizen of Belgium.' Jamal says that he '[can't] go back to Morocco without first having arranged for papers. All the effort and money would have been futile then.' For migrants with legalization aspirations, obtaining legal residence represents a start to a new life in the destination country, unlike migrants with settlement aspirations who feel that they build a new life without papers.

Like migrants with settlement aspirations, migrants with legalization aspirations often escape poor and corrupt countries. The category of legalization aspirations can be divided into two subcategories according to the strategies pursued to realize legalization. The first type largely consists of former asylum seekers who try to become legalized by applying for regularization or by filing appeals in their asylum application.<sup>3</sup> They often come from countries where serious political conflicts are part of daily life. They feel they cannot go back, and as the life of an irregular migrant carries the risk of being sent back, they strive for legalization. The second is mainly comprised of young migrants who were unemployed in their home country and who try to find someone to marry and legalize their stay this way.

It is important to distinguish between settlement and legalization aspirations because these accompany very different definitions of success. Whereas settlement migrants describe their life engaged in informal employment as a 'perfect life' (Andrei, Moldova), legalization migrants express they are not here 'to do illegal work' (Dnari, Sierra Leone) and that they are 'losing time' (Tarek, Algeria) like this. This means that in order to get what they aspire to, they need to employ very different strategies, and these different strategies are likely to go together with specific patterns of transnational activities. Moreover, different types of transnational orientations are implied by the three types of aspirations. In the next sections, I demonstrate that aspirations not only enclose transnational *orientations* but that these aspirations also actually help to understand the

transnational *activities* of irregular migrants. Doing so, I focus on economic, social and political activities.

The reader should note that hereafter I use the terms *investment migrants*, *settlement migrants* and *legalization migrants* instead of the longer terms ‘migrants with investment aspirations’, ‘migrants with settlement aspirations’ and ‘migrants with legalization aspirations’ that I have used thus far, for reasons of readability.

### **Economic transnational activities**

As investment migrants have come to the destination country to earn money that they want to invest in their home country, they usually remit large shares of their incomes. My respondents report that in practice, the sums of money they send home average between 2,000 and 5,000 euro per year. Investment migrants differ in the frequency in which they send their remittances: whereas some send small sums of money each month, others save larger amounts that they send every few months. Mehmet makes sure he sends money each month: ‘I have a house in Turkey. [My wife] lives there with my 3 sons and 2 daughters. I take care of them financially. (...) [I send] around 350 euro each month.’ However, some investment migrants do not remit at all. Although these save large shares of their income, they choose to bring the money back themselves instead of sending it to their home country. Whether investment migrants send money to the country of origin or save it, in the end all this money is invested there. This means that either way, investment migrants are very much engaged in economic transnational activities.

Settlement migrants normally prioritize their own financial situation and remit much smaller shares of their incomes than investment migrants do. The amounts they send normally remain under 1000 euro per year. As they want to build their lives in the destination country they need money to do so. This does not mean that they do not remit at all, but settlement migrants typically remit a much smaller share of their incomes than investment migrants do. When I asked Isidora (Ecuador) if she sends money home, she responded:

A little. They [my parents] are old so I send a little bit of money. And my father is ill so I send a little money for that. (...) It is impossible to send more money because I have four children who make expenses. And we have to pay the rent and now that the children are studying they need internet so I have to pay the rent and the internet, the electricity, so the costs are high.

It is clear that Isidora does not work to support family in Ecuador but to support her family life in Belgium. Because settlement migrants aspire to a future in the destination country, they have often brought their closest relatives over. This stands in stark contrast to investment migrants, who have usually left their partner and children behind in the country of origin because they want to keep their costs down while working as much as possible in order to be able to make the desired investments in their home country. As settlement migrants are usually not financially responsible for family members back home, they only send small sums of money to their parents or extended family on an irregular basis, usually in case of special needs that come up in the country of origin.

In contrast, most legalization migrants do not send any money to their countries of origin. Legalization migrants often do not have any financial responsibility towards people in the home country because they usually have not migrated for economic reasons. Moreover, they usually do not work or do not work that much because getting caught doing informal labour severely decreases the chances of legalization (cf. Van Meeteren 2010; Van Meeteren et al. 2009). This does not mean that they do not work because they are unable to or because they do not manage to find a job, but because they choose not to. Because of their aspirations they strategically work as little as possible and therefore have little money to remit. Efunsegun, for example, responded to my question if he sends money to Nigeria with: 'No! I am not working, what money do I have to send?'

Although their relatives in the origin country may have a strong need for additional income, legalization migrants feel that they have to get their legalization in order first before they are in the capacity to help their family. Alexandre (Congo), for example, says: 'Even if someone would give me a thousand euro now, I choose to pay the

rent two months ahead you know.’ In line with their aspirations, they prioritize their life in the receiving society and not remitting to the country of origin.

In a few cases, money even flows in the opposite direction. Some legalization migrants come from rich families and therefore do not send money to the country of origin; instead, their family members send money to them. This financial support enables them to pay their expenses while they wait for the outcomes of their procedures. Rasja, for example, says: ‘Before my family used to send money to me. But in my country [Syria], look things are really expensive here, (...) but in my country a thousand euro is a lot of money. Way too much, you understand that is why [they can’t continue to send money].’ Only a few of my respondents have occasionally been supported by their families back home and are thus responsible for a small and temporary inverted financial flow. Others indicated that although they could ask their family for financial support, they are too ashamed to do so.

Legalization migrants who aim to get married usually do not have transnational financial responsibilities either. Mehdi says: ‘No [I don’t remit] because there aren’t any family members that I am financially responsible for, neither here nor in Morocco.’ But more importantly, legalization migrants who are busy trying to find someone to marry do not remit because they prefer to attribute their limited resources towards achieving this aim. Marouane (Morocco), for example, says: ‘You have to go out a lot, you have to meet people. You have to flirt with women(...) the minimum [amount of money] you need is 60 euros per weekend.’

All in all, investment migrants save large shares of their incomes to either remit or to bring back themselves and settlement migrants usually send smaller sums of money to their country of origin. Legalization migrants remit least of all three categories. Thus, aspirations help to understand the extent to which irregular migrants engage in economic transnational activities and the way in which they do it. These findings run contrary to the expectations derived from the literature according to which irregular migrants simply remit more if they earn more. Only for investment migrants did I find evidence for such a relationship between their economic transnational activities and their socio-economic position.

### **Social transnational activities**

Because investment migrants aim to return they are socially oriented towards their country of origin and they invest time and energy in maintaining the social relations with their relatives and friends back home. They feel that their lives take place there instead of in the receiving society. They therefore make efforts to keep up to date and to keep in touch when they can. When asked how often they contact family or friends in their country of origin, investment migrants typically respond with answers such as: 'I call and sms my wife every day' (Sercan, Turkey) or '[I call my family] every weekend and normally I call friends as well' (Sofia, Bolivia). Most investment migrants call their friends and family members at least a few times per week and keep a minimum frequency of once a week.

Because investment migrants cannot actively take part in social life back home, many mention how much they miss their friends and families. Tümer (Turkey), for example, says: 'I don't have any difficulties, I just miss my family. As soon as I have enough money saved I go back.' And Elin (Bulgaria) says: 'I miss my wife and children very much. Last month my granddaughter was born and I haven't been able to see her yet. As soon as my savings are in order I go back.' The contacts they have with their spouse, children and other loved ones makes them want to go 'home' even faster.

In contrast, 'home' for settlement migrants is the receiving society. They make calls to the country of origin less frequently than investment migrants do: only once or twice a month. Settlement migrants aspire to build their lives in Belgium and the Netherlands and that is where the relatives and friends that are most important in their daily lives reside as well – either because they brought them over or because they have made new contacts during their stay. They therefore do not feel the need to be in touch with the home country as often as investment migrants do. Antonia (Ecuador) tells how she calls her parents less often now that she has settled down, brought her children over and now that her sisters all reside in Belgium as well: 'Before I always called my mother and father every week but now I don't do that anymore.' While most settlement migrants keep a habit of contacting their family and friends at least once a month, a few respondents with settlement aspirations even do not have any contact with the home



country at all. Over the course of their stay in Belgium and the Netherlands, they have broken all ties to family or friends in the country of origin.

Although settlement migrants do not contact the country of origin very often, they do frequent all kinds of social gatherings connected to their country of origin in the receiving society. Many settlement migrants visit the activities organized by formal or informal socio-cultural organizations. Settlement migrants play a vital role in the development of these culturally distinct immigrant communities through the activities they organize (cf. Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Through these activities cultural symbols associated with the country of origin are reproduced, which adds to a sense of 'home' in the receiving society (cf. Coutin 2005).

Legalization migrants often face barriers to maintaining transnational social contacts, which are clearly connected to their aspirations. Relatives back home often do not understand the hardships irregular migrants go through in their efforts to become legalized. Tarek (Algeria) told me: 'I call my mother sometimes so that she doesn't worry. I would like to have contact more often but then they say, "Oh you don't have papers yet, you are not trying hard enough, or what are you doing there." It is difficult to talk and to explain the situation.' Families have sometimes invested money into the migration plans of their relatives and do not like to see these fail. In case legalization migrants try to explain that it is not so easy to become legalized they are sometimes accused of being liars because other migrants have been successful.

The stakes are often so high that their social contacts in the country of origin encourage legalization migrants to keep on fighting. Enfunsegun (Nigeria) explained: 'I call them sometimes, maybe once or twice in a month. Sometimes they call me, but normally I call them. I always tell them about my feelings in Europe. (...) they encourage me, they say that I am the eldest son of the family, that I have to continue struggling, and one of these days God will see me through.' Instead of providing emotional support, the telephone calls to their relatives lead to increased stress which makes them call less often than they would like to. In some cases, legalization migrants even cut off all contact after a while.<sup>4</sup>

In short, social transnational activities are not absent among irregular migrants in spite of the costs involved.<sup>5</sup> Not all irregular migrants engage in these activities to the same extent, though, which can largely be understood from their aspirations.

### **Political transnational activities**

None of my respondents with investment aspirations are engaged in political transnational activities. Sometimes they even admitted that they did not follow what was going on in politics in their home country at all. As Diego (Chile) put it: ‘Look, if I am honest, I am outside of all, of politics.’ Diego is in Belgium to work and he does not want to spend his time on other things than work if they do not bring the attainment of his aspirations any closer. Furthermore, as investment migrants usually do not come from countries that are afflicted by war or political strife, there are few political activities connected to their home country organized in either Belgium or the Netherlands.

Settlement migrants are not politically active either. When I talked about political engagement with Fernanda and Camilla (Ecuador), Fernanda told me: ‘When my brothers call me they inform me but not like, I ask very little about politics personally.’ She then added: ‘I don’t even know who the president of Ecuador is, I don’t know.’ These migrants are focused on their lives in Belgium. Furthermore, they care about their family and friends back home but not so much about the political situation in their country. This lack of political interest, which goes hand in hand with a focus on living in Belgium and the Netherlands, is reflected in the activities of organizations that settlement migrants attend. These activities focus on transferring their cultural heritage to their children and on increasing social solidarity in the receiving society rather than on discussing the political situation of the home country. Although political issues may come up in private conversations, settlement migrants generally do not participate in political activities concerning their country of origin.

In contrast to investment and settlement migrants, legalization migrants who are involved in procedures are often engaged in political transnational activities. Maboula reported that: ‘Yes, when people ask me to demonstrate in the streets against certain things that concern my country yes I do that.’ Likewise, Lazzat explains how politically

engaged he is: 'Ever since I came here I have been very active with the Uyghur people (...) We do political activities like, for example, each year we do a demonstration at the Chinese embassy.' Some legalization migrants even indicate that they are still members of political parties in their country of origin. The political activities legalization migrants engage in are usually coordinated through migrant organizations. While settlement migrants attend activities of those organizations that focus on social solidarity and culture, legalization migrants seek out the activities of organizations that are active in the political arena.

On the one hand, legalization migrants involved in procedures engage in political transnational activities because they have fled their home countries due to the political situation there. By undertaking political transnational activities connected to their home country, they hope to improve the situation in their country of origin for their family members and friends left behind, and sometimes also because it might enable them to return in the future. In this sense, migration motives instead of current aspirations help to understand why they engage in these activities (cf. Bloch 2008: 301).

On the other hand, the chances of establishing a better situation in the country of origin are usually rather small, which makes it likely that many of the political transnational activities of these legalization migrants are inspired by instrumental reasons aimed toward realizing their aspirations in Belgium and the Netherlands. By bringing the problems in their home country to the forefront, chances of legalization may increase. Legalization migrants involved in procedures may hope that by indicating that the problems in their country of origin are severe, the Dutch and Belgian governments are persuaded not to send them back there but to grant legalization instead. This suggestion of an instrumental motivation – connected to achieving aspirations in the receiving society – for political transnational activities is sustained by the fact that many respondents report that other irregular migrants commonly cease their political transnational activities once they have acquired a legal status.

Mascini et al. (2009) have indicated that transnationalism is by no means self-evident among migrants who have sought to escape conflict. Likewise, I found that whereas many legalization migrants who are involved in procedures are engaged in political transnational activities, there are also some who choose not to be. They have

often completely closed the door on ever returning to their country of origin or the problems in their origin countries are not considered that urgent (anymore). They find their own day-to-day problems already too big of a worry to exert themselves for yet another cause. As Tarek (Algeria) says: ‘I like politics but (...) you know, you can’t be a member of an organization if you have a problem that is more important than that.’ Likewise, legalization migrants who aim to get married are not involved in political transnational activities. They are occupied with meeting a potential partner for marriage and find this most important for the moment.

Although one would expect political transnational activities to be rare among irregular migrants, I found that they were rather common among a specific group: legalization migrants involved in procedures. This can partly be understood from the political situation in their countries of origin, and partly because it fits with their aspirations, in contrast to migrants with investment or settlement aspirations for whom this is not the case.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

Above I have argued that a focus on aspirations helps to understand the transnational activities irregular migrants engage in. The results of my analysis are summarized in Figure 1.

[insert figure 1 here]

Obviously, the figure presented above does not do justice to all empirical diversity as it represents a simplified ideal-typical picture. Furthermore, as the aspirations of irregular migrants may shift over time, respondents sometimes found themselves in between the positions outlined above (cf. Van Meeteren 2010). I have taken aspirations at different points in the lives of irregular migrants as a starting point of my analysis. For the respondents that were interviewed by research assistants in semi-structured interviews, I could usually assess only one point in their lives: the moment when the interview took

place. However, during my fieldwork I have mostly been able to distinguish a sequence of aspirations throughout the migrant careers of my respondents. These sequences indicated that when irregular migrants change aspirations, their transnational activities change as well, yet there is no hierarchical order in these sequences.

In the literature on immigrant transnationalism it is suggested that transnational activities are exceptional. Portes (2003: 877), for example, notes that ‘research has indicated that regular involvement in transnational activities characterizes only a minority of immigrants and that even occasional involvement is not a universal practice.’ Likewise, Waldinger (2008: 24) finds that ‘transnationalism is a rare condition of being and transmigrants are an uncommon class of persons.’ Furthermore, irregular migrants are expected to engage in transnational activities least of all because of the obstacles they face (cf. Portes et al. 2007). Portes (2001: 189) found that ‘immigrant transnationalism is associated with a more secure economic and legal status in the host country.’ Likewise, Bloch (2008: 302) claims that ‘structural exclusions based on immigration status’ adversely affect transnational capabilities.

From my research on a diverse population of irregular migrants, a different picture emerges. I have found that many of my respondents quite frequently engage in transnational activities, and that these are not limited to economic activities but include social and political activities as well. Thus, even irregular migrants – a category facing important structural barriers – prove to be engaged in specific transnational activities. Moreover, it has proven fruitful to address aspirations to shed light on the question how to understand variety in the activities migrants do or do not undertake. Irregular migrants manage to find ways to engage in those types of activities that are important to them, in spite of the limitations they face. In fact, investment migrants prioritize their economic transnational engagements over their own well-being in the receiving society. This means that even though irregular migrants face barriers, these do not necessarily stop them from engaging in transnational activities.

Furthermore, I found that in those cases in which my respondents were not transnationally active, this is not necessarily because of the limitations they experience but that in specific cases this can be understood from their aspirations. This flies in the face of the implicit assumption that underlies much research which holds that as migrants

earn more, they engage more in economic transnational activities (see, for example, Bloch 2008). When settlement migrants earn more, they do not necessarily remit more. Instead, they mostly choose to spend their extra earnings on their own family in the receiving society. In addition, increasing income will most likely not make legalization migrants remit more but actually work less as they feel illegal work jeopardizes the realization of their aspirations. Only investment migrants increase their economic transnational activities if they earn more.

Moreover, whereas there may seem to be a logical relation between migrants' economic positions and their propensity to engage in economic transnational activities, this is less obvious for social and political transnationalism. An investment migrant from Turkey calls home more often than an investment migrant from Chile – because of the lower costs involved – but the latter makes calls more frequently than his co-nationals with settlement aspirations. Although it does cost money to make telephone calls and to participate in political activities, my respondents hardly mentioned these as reasons for lacking or infrequent activities. Whereas factors such as cost or income may have a limited affect on the frequency of specific activities, it is important not to ignore irregular migrants' aspirations.

Finally, my findings relate to the general literature on immigrant transnationalism and incorporation. Scholars of immigrant transnationalism have intensively investigated whether the general relationship between incorporation and transnationalism is of a positive or a negative nature. Some find that incorporation weakens transnational participation and others find that it does not (Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002; Levitt 2001). A huge step forward has been made by recognizing that in order to make statements about this relation, a differentiation needs to be made between economic, social and political activities, since the relation works differently for distinct types of activities (Snel et al. 2006). In addition, my findings suggest that future research should scrutinize whether this relationship works differently for regular migrants with different types of aspirations. Studies have advanced by distinguishing between different types of transnational activities, but they also need to contextualize on the side of agency of the migrants to properly understand why different migrants do or do not engage in certain types of transnational activities. This article suggests that this should not only be done by

taking migrants' migration motives into consideration (cf. Al-Ali 2002; Levitt 2001), but also by analyzing their current aspirations. The findings presented here are therefore not only relevant for researchers in the field of irregular migration, but future research on immigrant transnationalism can seriously benefit from taking different aspirations into account as well.

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## Notes

1 Irregular migrants are sometimes referred to as ‘undocumented’, ‘unauthorized’ or ‘illegal’ migrants. There is no consensus among scholars on the proper terminology to denote this category of people (see also Paspalanova 2006). I define irregular migrants as people who stay in Belgium and the Netherlands without official permission to do so at the time of research, regardless of whether they entered the country legally and regardless of whether they are economically active or not. Technically, I should speak of ‘immigrants’ instead of ‘migrants’. Whenever I speak of ‘migrants’ for reasons of readability, the reader should read ‘immigrants’.

2 The findings reported in this article stem from a larger research project, for which some initial data on irregular migrants living in both countries were already available.

3 If a denied asylum seeker files an appeal in the asylum procedure in Belgium and the Netherlands, s/he resides there illegally. The appeal provides no rights to (temporary) legal stay.

4 Legalization migrants sometimes do not have transnational social contacts from the outset of their stay because they often come from countries with political issues which can make it downright impossible to contact family and friends. In that case an absence of social transnational activities cannot be understood from their current aspirations – instead it is connected to a specific migration motive that is common among legalization migrants.

5 According to Vertovec (2004), the advent of prepaid telephone cards has severely reduced the costs of international telephone calls. This adds to the argument that many settlement and legalization migrants do not make calls that often because of their aspirations and not because of barriers such as costs.



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**Figure 1 Transnational activities per type of aspiration**

	<b>Investment</b>	<b>Settlement</b>	<b>Legalization</b>	
			<i>Procedures</i>	<i>Marriage</i>
<b>Transnational activities</b>				
Economic	Very active	Occasionally	Little to none	Little to none
Social	Many personal contacts	Some personal contacts and receiving society	Little social contact	Personal contacts and receiving society
Political	No activities	No activities	Some activities	No activities